CRISTIAN VACCARI

DIGITAL POLITICS in Western Democracies

A Comparative Study

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Cristian Vaccari

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Contents

	Preface	*vii*
	Acknowledgments	*xiii*
1	Introduction	1
	PART I: Theoretical Issues and Research Questions	
2	Understanding Digital Politics in Western Democracies	25
3	Parties and the Internet	48
4	Citizens and the Internet	57
	PART II: Parties and Digital Politics	
5	Structure and Features of Political Websites	69
6	Disparities in Political Websites	87
7	Party Characteristics and Their Online Presence	98
8	What Drives the Online Presence of Parties and Candidates?	111
	PART III: Citizens and Digital Politics	
9	Online Political Information in Seven Countries	131
10	Socioeconomic Inequalities and Online Political Information	138
11	Political Attitudes and Online Information	153

12 Political Engagement, Mass Media Use, and Online Information 176

13 Correlates of Online Political Information in Seven Democracies 190

14 Conclusion 207

Appendix *225*
Notes *243*
References *257*
Index *275*

Preface

Across the Western world, the internet has become a crucial platform for political interaction between citizens and the parties and candidates that court them. As a result, the role, function, and potential impact of digital media have been the subject of widespread interest among politicians and the professionals who work for them, among journalists, and among academics. The rapid and steady development of the technology and its uses—from bulletin boards to social media, from text-only interfaces to multimedia contents, from fixed to mobile access, and from dial-up to broadband—have made understanding the political and social implications of digital media an even greater challenge.

In most cases, however, the rise of digital politics has been interpreted and studied only within the frame of individual countries and not across the range of developed democracies that have seen both elected officials and electorates move online over the past decade. In particular, the United States has constituted the main source of inspiration, providing politicians with role models and success stories, professionals with best practices and business opportunities, journalists with ready-made comparisons and metaphors, and

scholars with theories and approaches. The implicit premise of these treatments has been that the difference between digital politics in the United States and in other Western democracies is simply a time lapse—that what happened and worked in America will sooner or later happen and work in other, somewhat similar countries. This conclusion is not surprising in light of the United States' role as a global superpower, technological innovator, model of democracy, and source of most academic research in the period between the creation of the internet and its mass diffusion. The institutional and organizational characteristics of American politics also make it a particularly fertile breeding ground for digital media. Yet, for precisely these reasons, the United States should *not* be regarded as a template for the development of internet politics elsewhere, as it nearly always has. Rather, it should be treated as an exception or, in social science parlance, a deviant case. Taking the United States as an implicit or explicit reference point has been useful in the early stages of research on digital politics, but it has led scholars to overlook important aspects that vary across Western democracies and affect how the internet is employed by both parties and citizens.

Another limit of most analyses of online politics so far is that they have focused on how *political actors*, such as parties and candidates, adopt digital media, but they have neglected how *citizens* integrate the web within their informational diets and repertoires of political action. This oversight is particularly problematic given that digital media afford users a greater degree of control, compelling them to make many more choices, and more consequential ones, than any mass medium. The internet allows citizens to do much more than reading or watching campaign propaganda. In addition to gathering information, they can donate money, distribute messages, organize events, maintain connections with other people, and sign up to volunteer on the ground. In turn, political organizations increasingly harness the web to ask their supporters to perform these and many other tasks. By setting up websites, social media profiles, and online applications, though, parties and candidates can only make these endeavors possible; the impact of their efforts will be impalpable unless voters encounter these tools and decide to engage with them. Consequently, understanding digital politics requires studying both its *supply* side (what parties and candidates propose) and its *demand* side (what citizens do online)—and doing so at the same time, within the same framework, and with congruent empirical methods.

This book aims to achieve these goals by offering the first large-scale and cross-national comparative study of digital politics, bringing together analyses of both parties and candidates *and* the people they court. It focuses on a range of seven Western democracies that together represent 46% of the online population of democracies worldwide—Australia, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States—over the period 2006 to 2010. It aims to show how—political, journalistic, and academic fascination with the United States aside—digital politics is not bound up in a process of progressive and inevitable Americanization but instead develops in distinct ways in different countries. Parties' and candidates' use of the internet is shaped by institutional constraints and opportunities as well as organizational and ideological characteristics. By the same token, citizens' online engagement is affected by social and economic stratification as well as political preferences and offline involvement. The impact of these causal factors is also conditional on contextual characteristics, such as the electoral system. Comparing different democracies—and different political actors and groups of citizens within them—will thus allow us to understand how and why these differences matter.

The cross-national empirical data presented throughout this book confirm that the United States should be treated as an exceptional rather than a modal (or model) case in the development of digital politics. American political organizations, for instance, have developed the participatory and organizational potential of the web more than their other Western counterparts largely because of the particular incentives afforded by unique institutional arrangements such as campaign finance regulation and party organization. The United States also stands out for the distinctive eagerness with which its electorate relies on the internet for political information, with almost one in two voters already doing so in 2008, as opposed to ratios between one in three and one in ten among the other countries included in this study. Thus, both supply-side implementation by parties and candidates and demand-side reception by voters set the United States apart from other Western democracies.

These differences aside, striking similarities can also be found across the seven countries included in this study despite wide contextual variations. Some systemic features affect digital politics in predictable ways that can be identified by comparative analysis. Thus, some affordances of the internet may be conducive to political outcomes through causal patterns that can be

generalized across Western democracies. In this book I address these issues under the rubrics of inequalities, engagement, and competition, and I look at these topics from both the demand and supply sides. *Inequalities* involve the extent to which parties' and citizens' resources affect the ways in which they employ digital media and, thus, the types of demands and agendas that are bound to be voiced and mobilized online. *Engagement* entails how political actors' use of the web relates to the ways in which they involve their supporters on the ground, as well as the extent to which citizens' offline engagement augments, and interacts with, their online participation. *Competition* addresses the winners and losers of digital politics in terms of the partisan and ideological alignments of the political organizations and types of citizens that turn out to be most active online, at least within the spatial and temporal limits of this research.

This latter qualification deserves being fully acknowledged and developed. As this book goes into press, national elections not covered here have already taken place in many of the countries included in this study, and are going to take place soon in the remaining ones As technologies and their social uses continue changing, politicians and citizens are constantly adapting and developing new forms of political action through digital media. Different political contexts in each country offer opportunities to test different combinations of causal factors that could affect both the supply and demand sides of digital politics, and that could not be evaluated in the framework of this research. One obvious example is the difference between the presidential campaigns of Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012. In the former, he was an underdog in a difficult Democratic primary that benefited from an anti-incumbent wave and movement-like enthusiasm in the electorate during the general election, whereas in the latter he was an unchallenged incumbent during the primaries but faced a difficult terrain in the general election, where most of the excitement from 2008 among his supporters had settled in. The technological environment had also changed between these two elections, with emphasis shifting on social media and the use of increasingly sophisticated database technologies to monitor all sorts of campaign activities and citizen behaviors in order to personalize messages at the individual level. Another interesting example is the ascent of the Five Star Movement in Italy, which developed from the blog of former comedian Beppe Grillo, used the web to build its organizational foundations, and preaches a somewhat utopian view of digital democracy as opposed to party politics. During the campaign

for the 2013 general election, the party avoided the mass media entirely and reached voters solely via the web and grass-roots activism. This strategy has allowed the Five Star Movement to garner an impressive one-fourth of the popular vote. Unfortunately, none of these developments, and others that could be observed in different countries included in this study that went to the polls from 2011 onward, can be accounted for in my analysis. That being said, I am confident that the patterns highlighted by this research are broader and more enduring than short-term technological and political changes that always occur from one election to the other. The empirical data that I employed measure two aspects—political actors' investments in their institutional digital platforms and citizens' propensity to get campaign information through the internet—that should constitute the baseline for any other type of online endeavor. The main causal patterns that I have identified should thus be applicable to changing technologies and evolving party strategies and citizen behaviors.

In sum, it is my hope that, by offering a comprehensive look across both the supply and demand sides of digital politics in seven Western democracies, this book will further our understanding of the role of the internet in political communication beyond rather simplistic generalizations of hypotheses that are better suited for the United States alone than for Western democracies writ large. In doing so, however, I am well aware that the empirical findings and interpretations presented here will require continuing scrutiny and rigorous testing by future research. Contemporary studies on digital politics, including this one, suffer from methodological limitations that have yet to be overcome at both conceptual and practical levels. In addition, technology and its uses will most likely continue changing and, in doing so, they will challenge politicians, citizens, and scholars to constantly reassess and often transform their cognitive maps as well as their practices. As their role expands to broader domains and larger parts of society, digital media thus continue testing one of the core promises of democracies—their ability to effectively adapt to change. Because digital politics poses crucial challenges and enticing opportunities for our societies, it is well worth studying.

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This book is the result of seven years of research and more than ten years of study. Throughout all this time, the number and value of the intellectual and personal debts that I have been fortunate enough to accumulate are enormous and difficult to properly recognize in a few words. The following thoughts will thus have to be metonymic—expressing only a small part for the whole of my immense gratitude.

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institutions, including Columbia University, the University of Oxford, and New York University. As this book goes to press, my academic journey is about to continue at the Department of Politics and International Relations at Royal Holloway University of London, where I am looking forward to further developing the topics covered in this book as well as exploring uncharted territory.

This book is a milestone in a personal and professional journey that has been both greatly challenging and immensely rewarding. Getting to this point—or even planning the expedition—would not have been possible without the help, advice, and support of many extraordinary scholars whom I have been fortunate to meet along the way. Each individual has taken different roles and capacities, and all of them collectively have been the best mentors, role models, and scientific advisers that I could have hoped for. Roberto Grandi helped me take my first steps as a researcher and has been a constant, invaluable presence in my professional as well as personal life. In my first experience as a student in the United States, Sam Popkin and Michael Schudson inspired me and provided much needed direction to my studies, as they still do now. Marino Livolsi believed in my potential when few saw it and was a competent and encouraging adviser during my doctoral studies. In conducting research for my dissertation, I was blessed in meeting Jim Thurber, who was incredibly generous in helping me develop my fieldwork as well as becoming a close friend to me and my family. After completing my graduate studies, I was fortunate to encounter Gianfranco Pasquino, who taught me the value and practice of the comparative method in political science, and Donatella Campus, who provided crucial advice and support in my training and development as a political scientist. While I made my first steps as an assistant professor, Giliberto Capano offered unwavering support for my work and sound advice on key professional and scientific decisions, and David Natali was the best officemate that I could have hoped for. Finally, Monroe Price has been a steady source of inspiration and critical thinking on both sides of the Atlantic.

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and keeping close contact with them between these events has enormously benefited my research, either by providing inspiration and suggesting new ideas and directions or by offering precious input on specific aspects of my work as it unfolded in conference papers, research projects, and informal discussions. Among them, at least two deserve a special thanks for their contribution to this book project. Turning years of empirical research into a manuscript for publication has been a challenging and learning enterprise in which I would have never succeeded without the invaluable advice, help, judgment, and support of Rasmus Kleis Nielsen. He has contributed immensely to this project, from encouraging me to pursue it to helping craft a publication strategy, reading the full manuscript, and providing insightful comments on many aspects of it. Dave Karpf has also been generous in commenting on various versions of the proposal for this book, providing steady and insightful advice on how best to present my arguments to an international audience and making it feel as if it was an achievable goal. In finding a publisher, I could not have hoped for a better home than Johns Hopkins University Press, for a better editor than Suzanne Flinchbaugh, and for a better copyeditor than Brian MacDonald. Their interest, attention, dedication, and support have really made a difference. The reviewers that evaluated the first proposal and the final manuscript have also greatly contributed to strengthening my arguments, improving my communication, and suggesting directions that I had not initially envisioned. Despite all the advice that I was fortunate to enjoy throughout all these years, any responsibility for not fully or properly incorporating it lies solely with me.

My interest in political communication was born with my interest in politics, and that, in turn, has one clear and genuine source—my loving family. My father Roberto has taught me that politics can be followed with passion, empathy, and the dedication that is needed to understand complex issues and to find workable compromises that can make a difference in people's lives. My mother Marcella has shown me that persistence and hard work can move mountains and that never giving up and always doing one's best can lead to both success and peace of mind. Together, they have never flinched in their support for whatever dreams I have pursued and have always encouraged me to think big rather than small.

While completing the first draft manuscript for this book, I was about to embark in the most important and exciting journey of my life. Marrying

Margherita has been the greatest blessing that I could have ever imagined. No words can match the joy, affection, liveliness, purpose, and wisdom that she has brought into my life. She has been my first motivator and critic, never letting me rest on whatever I had already achieved, while always making sure that I never lost sight of precisely that whenever my confidence was faltering. Together, many times we have accomplished what seemed impossible, and this book is no exception.

Digital Politics in Western Democracies

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

On 17 October 2005, more than four million supporters of the Italian coalition of center-left parties flocked to improvised polling stations across the country to select Romano Prodi, a former prime minister and chairman of the European Commission, as the coalition's prime ministerial candidate for the upcoming general elections. The massive turnout impressed politicians, journalists, and citizens, revealing that a great desire to participate was widespread among Italian progressive voters. A few weeks later, Prodi's campaign website added a new section that staffers hoped would help channel that enthusiasm into a web-based network of supporters. Such a network, it was believed, could substitute for an organized party structure, which Prodi, who was not a party leader and had no formal party affiliation, could not rely on. The custom-built platform was called Incontriamoci (Let's Meet) and, as its mastermind publicly claimed, it was modeled on Meetup .com, a US-based social networking site that had risen to great prominence during the 2004 Democratic presidential primaries in the United States. In that context, Meetup.com had been used to organize meetings and campaign events by supporters of Howard Dean, the once obscure candidate who had

become the frontrunner of the race before suffering fatal defeats in the early states which led him to withdraw (Teachout and Streeter 2008). Similar to its American model, Prodi's online campaigning hub allowed registered users to organize and publicize meetings and events and to contact one another through a system of personal profiles; users who did not want to register could still search and pledge to attend events in which they were interested. In the three months leading to the general election, Incontriamoci gathered around twenty thousand members, who helped organize about one thousand meetings. Such a performance for what was little more than a last-minute experiment was significant, to be sure, but nowhere near the organizational boost that the Prodi campaign had hoped for when it looked across the Atlantic for inspiration.

About one year later, on 16 November 2006, outsider Ségolène Royal surprisingly won the French Socialist Party presidential primaries, defeating better-known party stalwarts, nicknamed "the elephants" for their long political careers and insider credentials. In Royal's campaign, citizen participation had been the centerpiece, and the internet had been leveraged as a crucial outlet to encourage it. Royal's upset victory was partially the result of a successful membership drive by her party in the previous months. The Socialists had allowed new members to register online at a discounted price that would also buy them the right to vote in the primaries, resulting in about 70,000 new adherents and a 50% increase in membership rolls. At the end of the general election, which Royal went on to lose to conservative leader Nicolas Sarkozy in a close runoff, around 250,000 supporters had registered on her campaign website, Desirs d'Avenir (Desires for the Future), more than 150,000 political suggestions had been posted on her campaign forums, and more than 1,300 blogs supported her candidacy (Vaccari 2008a: 6). Like Prodi's, Royal's online efforts were inspired by the Dean campaign, particularly as regards its emphasis on blogs (Kerbel and Bloom 2005; Kreiss 2011). The campaign was often described as "Dean-like" by the media, and Royal signaled her affinity with Dean by claiming that she would ask him, as the then chairman of the US Democratic National Committee, to help her organize an overseas visit during her campaign. Unlike Prodi's, Royal's campaign also heavily incorporated online video, which had achieved great prominence during the 2006 American midterm elections. In that occasion, a gaffe captured on a YouTube video gone viral had contributed to the unexpected defeat of Virginia Republican senator George Allen (Karpf 2010). French candidates also began to ex-

periment with social networking sites, such as Facebook, which by then had just expanded beyond university colleges and high schools (Gueorguieva 2007).

As Andrew Chadwick usefully reminds us, "Before Dean and the 'Deaniacs,' Internet campaigning was widely regarded as dead and buried" (Chadwick 2006: 144). However, as the previous stories show, the (albeit temporary) online success of the Dean campaign prompted parties and candidates around the Western world to follow in its digital footsteps. By the same token, Barack Obama's online-enhanced success in the 2008 US presidential primaries and general election was a wake-up call for many politicians and campaigns all around the world, who rushed to digital media hoping to replicate Obama's success in online fundraising and supporter mobilization. A notable emulator was Israeli conservative leader Benjamin Netanyahu, whose website's design and tools almost perfectly mirrored Obama's and whose 2009 campaign theme, "Together We Can Succeed," closely resembled Obama's "Yes We Can" (Bronner and Cohen 2008). Other, less explicit forms of imitation blossomed all around the world, many of which were implemented by Blue State Digital, the consulting firm responsible for Obama's online strategy and infrastructure. After Obama, the same firm was hired by, among many others, Australian Labor Party prime minister Kevin Rudd; Brazilian Workers' Party leader Dilma Rousseff, who was elected in the 2010 presidential elections; the United Kingdom Labour Party, which failed to win a historic fourth term in the same year; and French Socialist Party presidential candidate François Hollande, who conquered the Élysée in 2012. In preparation for the UK 2010 general election, observers for both the Labour and Conservative parties were dispatched on fact-finding missions to the United States to learn how Obama was using the internet to collect donations and organize volunteers. Perhaps as a result of these expeditions, more or less overt imitations followed, such as the Conservative Party's myconservatives.com online engagement platform, which closely resembled Obama's mybarackobama.com, although it spectacularly failed to replicate its success (Campbell 2009). Across the world, rarely was *internet campaign* written or pronounced without some variant of *Obama-style* attached to it, and many parties and political organizations strived to identify lessons to be learned from that campaign (e.g., Anstead and Straw 2009). A few months later, the success in the United States of the internet-fueled Tea Party movement prompted no less than Italian television mogul and conservative leader Silvio Berlusconi to claim that this type of online grass-roots activism could help revive the country's center-right coalition

(Day 2010). As these and countless other examples demonstrate, the role and impact of the internet in American campaigns has often been taken as a reference point for other Western democracies.

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This book is about how politicians employ the internet to reach, court, and mobilize citizens and about how citizens rely on the web to inform themselves and engage with others politically. I call this broad domain *digital politics*. As any technological artifact, digital politics is the result of how social actors employ its affordances, that is, the possible uses that can be made of it. I consider this process as a two-faced coin, made of a *supply* side (the online presence of political actors, which structure the contents and opportunities that voters encounter on the internet) and a *demand* side (the political actions that citizens undertake online). As the examples discussed above demonstrate, the internet is now part and parcel of contemporary high-profile political campaigns across Western democracies. It is also an increasingly relevant part of mundane political activities such as obtaining, discussing, and distributing information about public affairs. More broadly, it is intertwined with many citizens' social, civic, and political everyday lives.

Our understanding of digital politics on both its supply and demand sides, however, has been lagging behind its increasing prominence. As shown by the few stories narrated above, many politicians and parties across the world have attempted to follow the trail blazed by American politicians in the hope that their fellow citizens would respond as US citizens had done—or, to be more precise, as those American citizens who had enthusiastically supported the online campaigns of some rather extraordinary candidates such as Dean and Obama. Nonetheless, whereas all parties and candidates in Western democracies now recognize the need to establish and maintain a professional online presence, no campaign has managed to employ the internet in the same way and with comparable results as the few high-profile American candidates whom they have tried to emulate. Digital politics in the United States may provide role models and inspiration for political actors and professionals in other countries, but it does not seem to offer a reliable empirical guide to the actual development and outcome of online political communication across Western democracies.

The main goal of this research is, thus, to move beyond simplistic projections of US experiences into other countries and understand how and why

parties, candidates, and citizens in Western democracies are adopting the internet for political purposes. To this end, I both describe and explain the differences as well as the similarities in digital politics across various political systems and actors. My comparison involves a large and diverse set of countries: Australia, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States, in a time frame between 2006 and 2010. To account for the supply side of digital politics, I focus on the features that are available on party and candidate websites. To understand its demand side, I investigate the extent to which citizens rely on the internet for political information during general election campaigns.

Comparing the ways in which politicians and citizens employ information and communication technologies requires assessing both the similarities and the differences across countries (as well as across different types of parties and citizens within the same country). In order to set the stage for this comparison, we must first question the premises (and promises) of the Americanization of digital politics worldwide and, second, replace US-centric paradigms with theory and evidence derived from comparative research on a diverse set of Western democracies.

Questioning the Americanization of (Online) Politics

A central premise of this book is that, if we really want to comprehend how digital politics is developing across Western democracies and what implications might follow, we must abandon the US-centric focus of most public discourse on internet politics. As the examples in the previous paragraph illustrate, the United States has so far constituted the benchmark against which most politicians, journalists, and citizens have assessed online political communication. This pattern is not new to political communication: indeed, it had already been observed in the late twentieth century. As television became the dominant medium through which citizens acquired information, political marketing techniques spread from the United States throughout most corners of the world. The "Research-Message-Media" trifecta (Plasser and Plasser 2002: 64) was exported overseas through American consultants' tapping into new markets, cross-country liaisons fostered by professional organizations, international training seminars, donor-driven democracy-assistance programs, and academic education (Plasser 2000: 36). At the dawn of the twenty-first

century, a new tide of Americanization seems to be rising, this time centered on web platforms, data-driven message personalization and resource optimization, and cultivation of continuous relationships with dedicated supporters through digital networks.

Americanization, however, is a problematic concept in and of itself and can imply various different meanings and outcomes. In reflecting about Americanization of Italian politics and culture, political scientist Gianfranco Pasquino (2005: 4) suggests that it "may entail three different processes: modernization, imposition, imitation." Commenting on the results of his comparative research on political consultants, Fritz Plasser (2000) argues that Americanization can be understood as the product of diffusion or modernization. Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (2012) has suggested that campaigns comprise different layers of communication media, which may be subject to different influences depending on context and types of political actors. Thus, according to these assessments, at least five meanings of Americanization need to be discussed: imposition, imitation, modernization, diffusion, and selective influence on specific layers of campaign communication.

The notion of American *imposition* of campaigning techniques can be safely dispensed with, at least as regards Western democracies in the present era. To be sure, features of American political communication may be imposed under the pretense of establishing a democratic due process when sovereign states fall under a sort of tutelage by the United States that includes election planning and implementation. This scenario may have applied to some Western democracies in the aftermath of World War II and to countries where Western powers have tried to implant electoral democracy after armed conflicts. However, current geopolitical relations between the United States and its Western democratic allies do not warrant these types of impositions.[1]

Imitation depends on the "soft power" (Nye 2004) of a country, that is, its ability to influence other actors on the basis of shared values and admiration rather than force or resources. From this perspective, emulating American politics may confer an allure of legitimacy to politicians and parties in other countries, making them look more competent, efficient, and up-to-date. Other domains of expertise that politicians have co-opted, such as public relations and marketing (Newman 1999), have historically developed in the United States. Finally, many successful global media companies, both analog and digital, are based in the United States and have a distinctly American character, from twentieth-century conglomerates such as Time Warner and

Disney to digital ventures such as Google and Facebook, and political communicators overseas have for a long time tried to emulate their US counterparts out of admiration for their creativity and professionalism. The influence of US-born ideas and skills may thus continue in the internet era. However, in and of itself imitation is a necessary but not sufficient driver of Americanization. Political actors may look at the United States as a source of inspiration for ideas on what *could* be done, but when it comes to allocating scarce resources and deciding what *should* be done, more compelling mundane considerations come into play.

Diffusion and *modernization* both entail linear processes but differ in the causal mechanisms they postulate. Whereas the diffusion theory considers Americanization as "a directional (one-way) convergence process," modernization treats it as "the consequence of an ongoing structural change in politics, society, and the media system" (Plasser 2000: 34). Diffusion presupposes an exogenous US influence, whereby communication technologies and techniques seamlessly travel as a comprehensive package across national borders. By contrast, modernization recognizes that communication innovations are shaped by social, cultural, and political developments that are endogenous to each political system. These changes tend to occur in a relatively similar fashion across the Western world, so they are met by similar communication responses in different countries (Swanson and Mancini 1996). However, because many of these systemic transformations tend to take place earlier and with greater intensity in the United States, American styles of political communication become models for politicians and citizens in other countries. From this standpoint, US techniques are not adopted as a whole simply because they are American but because some of these tactics are seen as tried-and-true methods to deal with pressing strategic challenges.

When applied to digital media, the diffusion and modernization theories can be ascribed, respectively, to the conflicting (and ultimately defective) paradigms of *technological determinism*, which claims that technologies are autonomous forces that shape society, and *social determinism*, which sees technologies as neutral tools that are entirely molded by social structures and actors (for a discussion, see Chadwick 2006: 17–21). Just as technological determinism fails to consider the mediating role of society in appropriating innovations, so does the Americanization-as-diffusion approach suggest that a one-(US-)size-fits-all logic can fully explain changes in political communication across the world. Both approaches are ultimately implausible, although some

of their logical implications are often implicit in many discussions of internet politics. On the other hand, notions of modernization do not postulate one-way influences of the United States per se but still entail a linear process of change in the political communication environment that leads to similar adaptations and outcomes across Western democracies. The most relevant works in this area are Jay Blumler and Dennis Kavanagh's (1999) typology of "three ages" of political communication and Pippa Norris's (2000) classification of campaigns as evolving from "premodern" to "modern" and, finally, "postmodern" stages (see also Farrell and Webb 2000). Although they are somewhat sensitive to contextual specificities,[2] both theories suggest that there is a linear succession of phenomena that affect political communication and party-voter relationships in roughly the same way and produce consistent responses across Western democracies.

In particular, Pippa Norris (2000) classifies premodern campaigns as characterized by a prominent role for party-controlled and labor-intensive communication, channeled by party newspapers, literature distribution, and door-to-door canvassing. The main effect of this approach to electioneering was to reinforce preexisting attitudes and mobilize partisan voters through socially transmitted cues and selective exposure to propaganda (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954). Modern campaigns were marked by the advent of television and mass communication, which, together with the weakening of party identifications and organizations, gave way to candidate-centered politics (Wattenberg, 1991; Aarts, Blais, and Schmitt 2011), "catch-all" (Kirchheimer 1966) or "electoral-professional" (Panebianco 1988) parties, professionalized campaigns run mostly through television, and a transformation of citizenship and representation in the form of an "audience democracy" (Manin 1997). Finally, postmodern campaigns are characterized by the increase in the volume of political messages, the multiplication of channels and outlets, the fragmentation of the news audience, and a significant decrease in citizens' trust in media institutions (West 2001). This process of "centrifugal diversification" (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999: 221) has once again increased the scope for selective exposure, as citizens can choose from a vast and diverse supply of media sources, genres, and messages (Prior 2007; Stroud 2011). Drawing from data on US audiences, W. Lance Bennett and Shanto Iyengar (2008: 714) have observed that, as a result of these developments, "the costs of producing even minimal media effects in elections have soared astronomically . . . , raising questions about the effects of

conventionally conceived persuasion campaigns." Because it is increasingly difficult for politicians to reach uninterested and inattentive audiences, a return to the "minimal effects" media research tradition seems to be in order (for a thoughtful counterpoint, see Holbert, Garrett, and Gleason 2010). At the same time, new communication channels, chiefly among them digital media, have increased the scope for interaction between political actors and citizens, so that "for some citizens, the election may represent a return to some of the forms of engagement found in the premodern stage" (Norris 2000: 140), when party organizations ensured feedback mechanisms from voters to elites.

Campaigns have adapted to this new scenario by partially abandoning the generalist, television-centered model of electioneering that dominated the second half of the twentieth century, when uniform, repetitive, and unidirectional message distribution was paramount. Postmodern campaigns are permanent efforts, increasingly decentralized, and more focused on specific segments of the electorate targeted via specialized media outlets (Cohen 2009) and database techniques (Howard 2006). Political actors are changing their approach to campaigning from classic political marketing based on short-term transactions (Newman 1999) to "relationship marketing," which focuses on building and maintaining long-term trust and commitment among voters (Bannon 2005).[3] Cultivating relationships with citizens has become an increasingly crucial strategic imperative because party-voter linkages have eroded, resulting, among other things, in electoral dealignment (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000), a hemorrhage of party members (Van Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke 2012), and declining voter turnout (Blais 2007). Increased abstention at the polls could, in turn, stimulate parties to revive electoral mobilization through on-the-ground activities because, in a polarized, low-turnout environment, the strategic value of nudging unreliable supporters to the polls may rival that of persuading elusive undecided voters (Endersby, Petrocik, and Shaw 2006). As Donald Green and Alan Gerber (2004) have proved in the United States, personal, unmediated contacts increase voter turnout more effectively than impersonal and mediated ones. Similarly, Justin Fisher and David Denver (2009) studied constituency campaigning in Britain and found that traditional methods—that is, those involving face-to-face interactions between activists and voters—have a stronger effect on party vote shares and turnout than contacting techniques based on computers, telephone, and direct mail. Thus, American parties have refocused their efforts on the "ground

game" to mobilize voters (R. K. Nielsen 2012), and European organizations are trying to counter the declines in their membership rolls by recruiting "sympathizers" to broaden their activist base and revitalize their grass-roots presence (Bosco and Morlino 2007).

To the extent that these developments are occurring in a similar way across Western democracies, the post-modernization of election campaigns should thus lead to congruent approaches to the internet among both political actors and voters in different countries. However, the modernization premise that is implicit in these works is dubious in many respects because the broad changes described above have different repercussions and lead to different adaptations in different political systems, particularly with respect to digital media and their political implications.

First, most comparative research has shown that in the modern, mass-media-centered age of campaigning, American techniques did not diffuse through other democracies as smoothly and broadly as the modernization paradigm suggests. In their study of campaign consultants worldwide, Fritz and Gunda Plasser (2002) observed that a wholesale import of political marketing techniques such as news management, opinion polls, negative campaigning, and televised advertising did not occur uniformly across the globe. They describe an incremental and country-specific adaptation process based on selective "shopping" of specific techniques and integration with existing practices. The authors claim that "there is no evidence that the proliferation of modern media technologies led to a homogenization of forms and styles of political communication. In fact, there are signs for an ongoing hybridization of political communication practices mediated by cultural factors and accentuated by specific institutional arrangements" (Plasser and Plasser 2002: 323). In a comparison of US and UK campaigning techniques, Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch (2000) reach similar conclusions and suggest that hybrid styles have developed that blend US techniques with national factors. Indeed, comparative studies of election news (Strömbäck and Kaid 2008) and political advertising (Kaid and Holz-Bacha 2006) confirm that differences between countries play a decisive role in shaping political communication and that linear models of modernization are a rather simplistic approximation to empirical reality (Esser and Pfetsch 2004). By the same token, not all digital applications that are adopted in US politics are bound to be reproduced in other democracies, not least because political elites in these countries may oppose them on various grounds. For instance, Peter Chen (2013) notes that

the Australian Labor Party hired American contractors for its ambitious 2007 online campaign but ended up rejecting most of their strategic advice.

What is more, the internet may affect political communication in a much less linear and uniform way than was the case with the previous, television-centric wave because of the complex technological and social nature of digital media. Jonathan Zittrain (2008) has defined the internet as a five-layer architecture that encompasses physical transmission channels, protocols, applications, contents, and social practices. Not only is this multifaceted structure complex, but it also constantly changes due to innovations in technology, business models, and social uses. David Karpf (2012) has effectively captured these characteristics by defining the internet as a "continually-evolving suite of tools." Given the complex and dynamic profile of the internet, we should expect that its adoption by parties and citizens around the world may respond and adapt to contextual characteristics to a greater extent than the more static and uniform mass media campaigning techniques of yesteryear.

The notion of hybridization, although it represents a sensible variation on the modernization theme, does not expand our knowledge of political communication beyond noting that American techniques are often blended with local, context-adaptive methods. A fuller understanding of the developments of campaign communications, and of digital media within them, requires an appreciation of the many causal factors that affect them—and that may push toward linear diffusion in some cases, encourage hybridization in others, and fully obstruct adoption in others still. Toward this end, the *layered approach* offers a more nuanced and granular perspective on changes in political communication than any linear model, whether premised on diffusion or modernization. The layered approach suggests that, although campaigns' priorities and defining technical tools do change over time, such a process is not linear and does not affect all communication channels in the same way. Even within the same political context, campaign techniques are adopted in different ways by different political actors. Thus, organizational factors must be considered alongside systemic characteristics. As Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (2012: 17) summarizes this approach, "Different practices of political communication seem to coexist and to be mixed and matched by campaigns on the basis of their own perceived interests, the ideas and know-how they have, the resources at their disposal, and the communications environment around them."

In this book, I adopt such a layered approach to political communication in order to scrutinize empirically the extent to which the affordances provided

by the web are adopted by political actors and citizens, as well as to explore the causal dynamics behind these processes. From this standpoint, convergence between the United States' and other countries' styles and outcomes of digital politics may be rooted in the fact that most ideas and sources of know-how related to internet politics originated in the United States at both theoretical and practical levels—the myth of Dean's and Obama's "first digital campaigns" as well as the international consultancy businesses that they spurred. However, this homogenizing factor interacts with context- and organization-specific mediating influences. Reception and implementation of such ideas may vary depending on political actors' perceived interests and resources, so that different organizations and individuals will approach these challenges and opportunities in ways that best fit their needs, capabilities, and preferences. The media and political environments also vary across countries and, crucially, in most Western democracies differ considerably from those of the United States. Such contextual factors not only create differential incentives for political actors but also influence the societal patterns of adoption of the internet among citizens and, thus, the potential outcome of digital politics when tools are met by users. The role of these factors, however, has for the most part escaped us because our research and, especially, our theories have focused too much on a single country—the United States—and too little on what can be learned from the differences in how digital politics has developed across Western democracies.

Comparing Democracies Online

One of the reasons why our understanding of digital politics has so far been too narrow and simplistic is that the scientific literature on digital media and politics has yet to move beyond its initial US-centrism, especially at the theoretical level. Although there are many empirical studies of digital politics in countries other than the United States, most of the theoretical frameworks they rely on were developed to explain how digital politics unfolded in the American context. Moving beyond this limitation is a necessary step if we are to appreciate the role of context and of different types of incentives among both political actors and citizens.

First, the most relevant and cited works on internet campaigning (Bimber and Davis 2003; Foot and Schneider 2006), political blogs (Davis 2009), web-based political participation (Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal 2008), and

general assessments of digital media's contribution to democracy (Margolis and Resnick 2000; Howard 2006; Hindman 2008) are all based on empirical research on the United States. Similarly, a meta-analysis of thirty-eight studies on the relationship between internet use and civic and political engagement has limited its focus to studies of the United States "because of the volume of research on the American population" (Boulianne 2009: 195).

Second, most of the international literature on internet politics takes the US experience as a reference point and, implicitly or explicitly, compares it to other individual countries (see the country case studies in edited books such as Gibson, Nixon, and Ward 2003; Gibson, Römmele, and Ward 2004; Oates, Owen, and Gibson 2006; Ward et al. 2008). While this approach is valuable in and of itself, it cannot fully employ the comparative method and thus falls short of testing hypotheses based on causal models that specify how the differences and similarities between countries affect digital politics. The US-centric focus has often resulted in what Stephen Ward and Thierry Vedel (2006: 223) call "unhelpful comparisons," usually involving the United States and another country. The explanatory power of such studies is limited because the institutional features of the United States are quite unique by comparison with most other Western democracies. In a thorough analysis of how institutions may affect online campaigning, Nick Anstead and Andrew Chadwick (2009) identify at least five relevant differences between the United States and the United Kingdom: degree of systemic institutional pluralism, organization of party membership, candidate recruitment and selection, campaign finance rules and dynamics, and the "old" campaign communication environment. These five sets of institutional characteristics offer different incentives for political actors to adopt digital media, which in turn affects the ways in which the internet is integrated into politics in these countries. Anstead and Chadwick's conclusions are all the more remarkable considering that studies that treat the United States and United Kingdom as similar political systems are quite common in comparative research and even more so in the literature on internet politics.

Third, the few available comparative studies on the adoption of digital media by political actors have been focused rather narrowly, either on English-speaking countries (e.g., Margolis, Resnick, and Wolfe 1999; Gibson et al. 2003; Jaeger, Paquette, and Simmons 2010; Gibson and Cantijoch 2011) or on specific features such as interactive website components (Lilleker and Jackson 2011). The Internet and Elections Project (Kluver et al. 2007), a broader comparative

study, included as many as nineteen countries but cobbled together a wide range of political actors (i.e., candidates, government agencies, parties, press, nongovernmental organizations, labor organizations), thus failing to discriminate between actors that are directly involved in electoral politics and those that are not. This limitation of an otherwise valuable effort is crucial because, although the web has encouraged a convergence of the repertoires of action among distinct types of political entities (Chadwick 2007), the communication and organizational goals of parties and candidates remain distinctive because they need to compete for votes in elections at all levels of government, a demand not faced by other types of organizations involved in the political arena.

Fourth, to the extent that some comparative studies, such as the ones that I have just mentioned, have been conducted on internet politics, they have investigated the supply side (i.e., the online presence of political actors) rather than the demand side (i.e., citizens' online political behaviors). As a result, we know less about the conditions under which citizens in different political contexts rely on the web to engage with the political process than we do about how parties and candidates court them through the internet.

The lack of fully comparative research on the supply and, especially, the demand side of digital politics has led most researchers to overlook important contextual specificities that can be appreciated only through a broader look at a diverse set of countries. Whether they are based on technologically deterministic notions of one-way diffusion or on linear theories of converging cross-country modernization, such approaches are insufficient to understand digital politics among different political actors—both elites and citizens—and across different political contexts. To fill such void is the goal of this book.

Why Digital Politics Matters

Studying the patterns of use of web-based political tools by politicians and citizens is important because the internet is affecting contemporary Western democracies in at least three relevant ways.

First, digital media contribute to the emergence of what Manuel Castells has called *mass self-communication* as a distinctive set of social and political relationships. Castells (2007: 248) defines it as "a new form of socialized communication" that "is self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception by many that communicate with many." As a result,

dissemination of political information has been opened to outside influence so that "ordinary citizens, operating away from the elite political-media nexus, can, on occasion, affect the meaning and flow of news" (Chadwick 2011: 19). From this perspective, although digital media fall short of fulfilling most utopian promises of radical democratization (Hindman 2008), they have contributed to broadening citizen engagement in some meaningful ways (Anduiza, Jorba, and Jensen 2012).

Second, as Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport (2011) have observed with respect to protest, the internet offers two affordances that may facilitate political action by organizations and citizens: it reduces the costs of organizing and participating in political activities, because the required information can be distributed and retrieved easily and quickly; and it allows people to coordinate without sharing the same physical space, as they can access the relevant data regardless of their location. These affordances can also be leveraged by parties, candidates, and their supporters, thus blending the digital repertoires of action of rather different types of political actors (Chadwick 2007). As Andrew Chadwick (2009) has observed, web 2.0 platforms comprise "granular" participatory environments, where more and less demanding activities can be integrated in order to attract people with different levels of political engagement and commitment. Rather than idealized notions of the deliberating good citizen, these environments enable voters to perform their "monitorial" role (Schudson 1998), which is more feasible given the time pressures (W. L. Bennett 1998) and cognitive limitations (Lupia and McCubbins 1998) that affect them.

Third, parties and campaigns can take advantage of digital affordances to augment and facilitate important organizational endeavors. From this perspective, Helen Margetts (2006: 530) has envisioned a new organizational model termed "cyber parties," which "use web-based technologies to strengthen the relationship between voters and party rather than traditional notions of membership" and aim to involve voters writ large rather than card-carrying subscribers. Digital media allow political organizations to leverage on what Rachel Gibson (2009) has termed the "citizen-campaigner"—individuals who do not belong to the party or campaign staff but carry on some relevant electioneering activities through the web.

The internet can thus help political organizations assemble volunteer networks to propagate their messages (Howard 2006: 162). Political organizations were initially reluctant to encourage online participation out of fear that they

could not fully control it (Stromer-Galley 2000). However, recent technological developments, particularly database applications, enable party and campaign staffers to monitor, forecast, and manage the outcomes of citizen engagement both online and offline. Voter databases allow elites to acquire and use valuable data "as individuals willingly produce and reveal the most elaborate information about their tastes and preferences within enclosed technological frameworks" on social networking sites and engagement platforms built by political actors (Chadwick 2009: 22; see also Howard 2006). Political organizations can closely monitor how their online supporters respond to different contents and requests through what I term "data-assisted guidance" (Vaccari 2010) and Daniel Kreiss (2012) calls "computational management." These digital technologies of surveillance allow political actors to maximize the success rates of their appeals and to request and allocate resources (e.g., volunteer hours) when and where they are most needed. This process is spawning hybrid organizations that merge and mediate between top-down and bottom-up modes of operation and between formal and informal modes of engagement (Flanagin, Stohl, and Bimber 2006; Chadwick 2007; Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl 2012).

Politics as Usual?

Despite the relevance of the former considerations, digital media have often been unrealistically credited with immense potential to transform fundamental aspects of representative democracy. With respect to the supply side of politics, the dynamic and distributed nature of the web has been thought to be able to boost competition among parties and candidates and to encourage them to be more inclusive toward citizens. As regards the demand side, the internet has been seen as a channel of rich, diverse, accessible, and politically relevant information and as a springboard of widespread, intense, and effective citizen participation.

Empirical research has for the most part documented that utopian expectations about digital politics were not warranted and that the internet is not likely to bring about massive political change in and of itself. This is the cornerstone of the *normalization* theory as proposed at the beginning of the millennium in a famous book titled *Politics as Usual*, in which American political scientists Michael Margolis and David Resnick (2000: 14) argue, "There is an extensive political life on the Net, but it is mostly an extension of political life

off the Net." According to their research, the internet has little effect on political competition, leaving minor parties and candidates in no better position than they were before. The web also produces minimal, if any, changes in citizens' information and participation, as it attracts only those who are already interested and engaged in politics. Also, contrary to early speculations, parties and candidates are reluctant to promote citizen participation through digital media.

Whereas the basic tenets of the normalization theory were valid with respect to the US debate of the 1990s, they look less accurate and useful if placed within the contemporary context of digital politics, particularly in comparative context.

First, that the internet is intertwined with everyday life and political realities is not necessarily an argument for its political irrelevance. Arguably, web 2.0 environments and political actors' increasing reliance on internet platforms as back-end communication channels have closely entangled digital media with offline realities, making the internet more rather than less relevant in the process. One is hard pressed to think about how the internet could affect political reality while at the same time being isolated from it.

Second, the normalization theory was originally premised on evidence coming solely from research on US parties, candidates, and voters. As we have seen in this chapter, however, the idea that digital politics across Western democracies may resemble that in the United States owing to theoretically dubious processes of diffusion or modernization does not stand close empirical scrutiny. If one takes the more nuanced and empirically appropriate layered approach as a starting point, then the extent to which the "politics as usual" thesis can be accepted depends on whether the interests and resources of different (groups of) political actors and citizens in the United States resemble those of their counterparts in other countries. In other words, *political context* must be accounted for. In the next chapters, I highlight how the US political context differs from that of other Western democracies in many significant respects and how these differences may affect both the supply and demand sides of digital politics. In turn, this finding suggests that many of the tenets of the normalization theory should be considered as generalizations of empirical findings that are valid in the United States but not necessarily elsewhere.

Third, the question whether digital politics is "politics as usual" should not be treated, as implicit in normalization theory, as a yes-or-no dichotomy,

but as a matter of degrees and conditions. The internet may not make much of a difference for some parties and voters in some contexts, but it may do so for some others in other situations. Even in the same political system, the web may affect some political actors and groups of citizens but not others. For instance, while US minor parties have benefited little from digital media in their fight for relevance against the Democrats and Republicans, in Continental Europe many small parties have emerged—such as the Pirate Party in Germany and the Five Star Movement in Italy—whose success would be hard if not impossible to imagine without the internet. In the same countries, however, other minor parties have failed to take advantage of digital media in a similar fashion. By the same token, although politically interested and motivated citizens are more likely to engage with internet politics, this does not imply that citizens who challenge the legitimacy of their political systems cannot rely on the web to get information and organize protests, or that contents and endeavors that originate online cannot ripple offline under certain conditions. The question to be answered is, precisely, Under which conditions are these outcomes more likely to occur? As we will see throughout this book, most aspects of digital politics are context-conditional rather than universal, including the various declinations and implications of the normalization hypothesis.

Outline of the Book and Main Findings

This book shows how political actors and the voters they court are adopting digital media in different national contexts across the realm of Western democracies through a comparative analysis of online political practices by both parties and citizens.

Part I provides an overview of my main research questions and of the methodological choices that I have made to address them (which are illustrated in greater detail in the appendix at the end of the book). In particular, I present the subset of seven Western democracies covered in this study—Australia, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States—as a diverse sample of cases that offers meaningful variance on many relevant characteristics and can thus be considered representative of a broader realm of established democratic political systems. I also present the two sources of data for my empirical analysis: on the supply side, a longitudinal analysis of the publicly accessible features of party and candidate websites;

and, on the demand side, national postelectoral surveys of representative samples of the voting-age populations in each country. The following two chapters offer a closer look at the main theoretical conceptualizations and empirical evidence regarding how parties and citizens employ digital media for political purposes.

Part II addresses how parties and candidates structure their websites both during and between election campaigns and how their online presence has evolved over time. The reader is introduced to three indices that measure political actors' website characteristics: *information*, which entails the one-way distribution of contents; *participation*, which involves two-way online dialogue as well as offline involvement in political activities; and *delivery*, which measures how effectively a website is organized, how accessible it is, and how frequently it is updated. These indices are then used as dependent variables in bivariate and multivariate analyses that highlight how structural and organizational factors affect the development of party and candidate websites.

The data show clear differences across countries, with US websites exhibiting significantly higher indices of participation, which suggests that American political actors have incentives to harness digital media that are markedly different from those in other countries. While parties' online presence is affected by some contextual conditions such as voter turnout, the most powerful explanatory variables are located at the organizational level: in particular, resources, decentralization of decision making, and ideology. Parties with more resources tend to offer richer websites, although the correlation is stronger when majoritarian electoral systems structure the electoral competition. Parties that employ inclusive methods (such as primaries) to select their leaders and candidates also tend to invest more heavily in their digital presence. Finally, progressive parties tend to develop more sophisticated websites than conservative ones, and radical parties, both right and left, for the most part adopt a lukewarm approach to digital media.

Part III assesses to what extent and under what conditions citizens use the internet to get information during election campaigns. These patterns are illustrated by bivariate and multivariate analyses of national election surveys in each of the seven countries included in the study, whose results are compared qualitatively to highlight similarities and differences.

The data reveal, on the one hand, the persistence across countries of a digital divide related not to access per se but to knowledge and motivations. Voters who turn to the internet for electoral information are disproportionately

young, well educated, and male. These developments are a normative mixed blessing. On the one hand, the web seems to reinforce political inequalities related to gender and education rather than alleviating them. On the other hand, young voters' ease with digital media can increase political engagement among the youth unlike any other offline channel of political information and participation. Moreover, income does not significantly affect online political information in any country apart from the United States and the United Kingdom.

Citizens who go online for political information also tend to be much more interested in politics than those who do not. Whereas this fact suggests that digital media mostly engage those who are already politically involved, other findings show that this is only part of the story. Engaging in politics offline often leads to getting political information on the internet, but the types of offline involvement that more strongly correlate with online engagement tend to be informal and not very demanding. In particular, the strongest correlations involve discussing politics within one's offline social networks. Thus, digital media may have important indirect effects through face-to-face interpersonal communication because the political contents that citizens acquire through the internet have greater chances of being distributed through informal political discussions. As a result, new patterns of two-step flows of political communication are being opened thanks to the web—or, to paraphrase a popular advertising claim, what happens online does not stay online.

Online campaign engagement also depends on voters' political preferences. In Australia, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States, it is mostly those citizens who feel capable of understanding and affecting politics and those who trust parties and their national governments that rely on the internet for political information. By contrast, in France, Spain, and, to some degree, Italy, the web is mostly a vehicle employed by politically disaffected voters. Online politics also seems to attract voters with different ideological and partisan preferences depending on whether a majoritarian or proportional approach to democracy prevails. In the United States, the United Kingdom, and, to some degree, Australia—which all employ majority electoral systems and where the mechanics of electoral competition is essentially two-party—supporters of the major parties in opposition tend to be more engaged online than those of the incumbents. By contrast, in Spain, Italy, and Germany—where proportional systems are used that allow minor parties to elect representatives and affect or take part to government in various ways—

minor parties tend to be overrepresented among online audiences, and supporters of major progressive parties often prevail online even when these parties are in government.

The final chapter summarizes the evidence illustrated in the previous two parts and reconnects it with the theoretical background presented in the introduction and part I. It draws conclusions and highlights implications that are relevant not only for digital politics but also for political communication, party competition, party organization, political participation, voting behavior, and the study of contemporary media landscapes.

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CHAPTER TWO

Understanding Digital Politics in Western Democracies

Although parties and politicians worldwide eagerly attempt to emulate American innovations in digital politics, transplanting online tools outside the United States has rarely achieved the desired goals. However, most of the scholars who have studied these subjects have taken the United States as their lone empirical referent or main reference point, which has resulted in a limited understanding of these phenomena, as the peculiar characteristics of the American political and social systems have often been neglected in comparative research.

To address these limits, this book compares seven Western democracies—Australia, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States—between 2006 and 2010 in order to understand how parties, candidates, and citizens are engaging with digital media. After presenting my research questions and illustrating the main methodological choices that I have made to address them in this chapter, I discuss their theoretical and empirical background in the next two chapters. I begin by summarizing the main hypotheses and the expectations related to each of them. In addition,

Table 2.1. Summary of Theoretical Background and Main Research Questions

	Micro (citizens)	Meso (political organizations)	Macro (political system)
Inequalities	Does citizens' socioeconomic status affect their access to and participation in internet politics?	Does parties' online presence depend on their available resources?	Are political websites more sophisticated and citizens more active on the web in countries where technological development is higher?
Engagement	Are the people who use the internet for political purposes more likely to be interested in politics and to participate offline?	Do more inclusive parties provide greater opportunities for voters to inform themselves and participate online?	Are parties and candidates more active online in contexts where political culture is more supportive and citizen participation is higher? Does the internet provide a channel for citizens to express systemic support or lack thereof?
Competition	Do voters' partisan and ideological preferences affect online information? Which preferences have the strongest effects?	Are challengers more likely than incumbents to invest in e-campaigning? Does ideology affect the characteristics of political websites? Which parties offer more online tools?	Do parties and candidates employ different online strategies in different electoral contexts? Do electoral systems provide different incentives for parties to campaign online and for citizens to follow them?

the intersections between levels of analysis and topics of inquiry are summarized and developed into specific questions in table 2.1.

Inequalities may exist at the individual level because, as digital divide research has shown, citizens do not enjoy universal access to the internet, let alone high-speed connections, nor are the skills needed to fully take advantage of digital media evenly distributed within and among populations.

Offline social stratification may thus translate into online political stratification and thus generate inequalities in the ways in which different groups of citizens engage with digital politics (see chapter 4). At the organizational level, normalization theory (Margolis and Resnick 2000; see chapter 1) posits that more resourceful parties and candidates will use their superior moneys to be more visible and effective online, resulting in uneven competitive patterns on the internet (see chapter 3). At the system level, technological development in a country may affect the incentives that parties and candidates have to invest in digital media. The level of internet diffusion determines how large their potential online audiences are and the expectations that citizens might have as to how sophisticated parties' digital efforts should be. Technological development may also affect voters' aggregate levels of online information, so that the countries with more internet connections may also be the ones where most people engage with politics through the web.

Engagement, broadly understood as attentive activity to politics (Berger 2009), entails how citizens experience politics through the internet. People who are interested in politics and participate in offline political activities tend to be more involved online as well, which may lead to reinforcement of political attitudes and behavior rather than activation of previously unengaged citizens (see chapter 4). At the meso level, parties and campaigns that engage with their supporters through inclusive practices and grass-roots organizational arrangements can be expected to be more at ease with digital media than parties that are structured in a more centralized and hierarchical fashion. At the macro level, the degree to which citizens participate in politics and the extent to which they support political authorities may constitute a more hospitable environment and a larger demand function for parties' online efforts than disaffected polities with widespread political apathy and hostility toward parties. Digital media may more easily channel (and allow to organize) the voices and preferences of citizens who are supportive of the political system, or they may function better as conduits to express political disaffection and criticism. In light of the lingering crisis of legitimacy that Western democracies are suffering (Dalton 2004), it is thus important to understand whether and under what conditions the internet can channel diffuse political support or lack thereof.

Finally, the study of internet politics should not shy away from addressing the impact of digital media on political *competition*, which is fundamental for the functioning of democratic regimes (Schumpeter 1942; Sartori 1987). At the

individual level, citizens' political and party preferences may affect their likelihood of using the internet, thus placing some parties in a better position than others in mobilizing their supporters online. Among party organizations, it has been suggested that incumbency may reduce incentives to adopt communicative innovations and that some types of parties may be ideologically or philosophically more inclined toward certain uses of the internet (see chapter 3). With respect to systemic conditions, the electoral context (such as the type and temporal distance of elections) and institutional arrangements (such as the electoral system) may affect how parties use the internet and which ones have greater incentives and means to do so. These factors may also influence the propensity to engage with digital politics among supporters of different parties.

Answering the questions presented in table 2.1 requires a comparative design that allows controlling for various contextual conditions and party organizational factors, as well as analyzing citizens' behavior in different political systems. The methodology I have chosen to pursue this goal, discussed in this chapter, entails the comparative design of my research, the data I have collected, and the ways in which I have analyzed them with respect to both the supply and the demand of digital politics.

Design of the Comparative Research

This research aims at comparing a defined set of countries in order to test hypotheses and answer research questions on digital politics across the broader realm of Western democracies. In order to do so, the choice of the countries to be compared is crucial. Cases must be both *representative* of the wider domain they are part of and *different* from one another in ways meaningful enough to permit the effects of these differences to be empirically assessed (Seawright and Gerring 2008: 296).

The extent to which a limited number of cases can be representative of a larger realm of countries depends on the extension of the population to which the underlying theory applies and for which the cases must somehow stand. If, for instance, we aimed at generalizing our findings to the whole world, we would have to build a large sample that represents all the types of countries that exist across the globe. At a minimum, such a sample should comprise democratic, nondemocratic, and mixed political regimes; countries from all

five continents and all the relevant macro regions within them; big and small, unitary and federal, rich and poor states; and so forth. This task is usually outside the reach of social science research owing to conceptual, operational, and financial constraints. Political systems across the globe vary so widely that even a relatively large number of countries may not be representative of the whole world. A preferable and more realistic strategy is to ensure representativeness by limiting the spatial and temporal scope of the theoretical propositions to be tested. This path leads to a "local theory" (Boudon 1984), which applies only to a specific domain. In social science parlance, this can be understood as a particular equilibrium point in the trade-off between internal validity (how strongly the veracity of a causal relationship can be established) and external validity (how broadly a causal relationship can be generalized). A local theory thus allows the researcher to make stronger causal claims that apply to a limited universe as opposed to weaker but broader causal statements.

As a result, the research questions this book addresses pertain not to all political regimes but only to democracies and, among them, to established Western democracies in particular. Consequently, the findings do not apply to "third wave" democratic regimes (Huntington 1991), such as Central and Eastern European countries and rapidly developing democracies such as India and Brazil—let alone authoritarian regimes such as Russia. This limitation of scope allows us to discount the effect of causal factors that are constant across established Western democracies and whose variation can affect online politics. For instance, a country's democratic history has been found to influence the supply of digital politics, as parties in newer democracies tend to have a weaker web presence than those in more established regimes (Lilleker et al. 2011); similarly, political development has been found to correlate with various aspects of political actors' online presence (Kluver et al. 2007: 254–257); and the length of a country's democratic history affects the degree to which resources affect online competition among parties (Strandberg 2008: 236). Thus, including countries with a similar level of political development and a well-established democratic tradition allows these variables to be discounted from the causal models that are going to be tested.

The seven countries included in this study are representative of Western democracies for two main reasons: the cumulative *size* of their populations with an internet access and, most importantly, the internal *diversity* of this sample of cases.

In terms of *size*, in 2008 the online populations of Australia, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States amounted to as many as 421.76 million internet users, or 27% of all internet users worldwide, which in that year totaled 1.586 billion (World Bank 2011). If one considers only countries that Freedom House classified as "free" in 2011, which can be taken as a rough indicator of a functioning liberal democracy, then there are 730.26 million internet users in countries that Freedom House graded between 1 and 1.5 and 913.14 million in countries that were ranked between 1 and 2.5, which is the conventional cutoff point separating democratic from nondemocratic regimes (Freedom House 2011). The seven countries included in this study, distributed across three continents (America, Europe, and Oceania), thus comprise about half the online populations living in liberal democratic regimes.

With respect to the internal *diversity* of the sample of cases, a classic approach in comparative research distinguishes most similar systems designs (MSSD) and most different systems designs (MDSD), as defined by Przeworski and Teune (1970). When similar systems are compared, the characteristics they share are kept constant in order to probe the causal impact of a small number of variables (ideally, only one) under which the cases differ. By contrast, when different systems are compared, the researcher tests causal relationships between the few properties that two or more countries share while discounting the many aspects under which they differ. Since Przeworski and Teune's path-breaking work, however, comparative research has developed more nuanced approaches to case selection. Jason Seawright and John Gerring (2008) identify as many as seven types of case selection techniques (including MSSD and MDSD) that entail different trade-offs between representativeness and variance. Among them is the *diverse case* selection strategy, whose main goal is "the achievement of maximum variance along relevant dimensions" within a defined population (Seawright and Gerring 2008: 300). By including cases that differ as widely as possible (within a defined population) in some theoretically relevant characteristics, this method allows all the most important causal configurations that can affect the dependent variable to be incorporated. This diversity is particularly desirable in the field of digital politics because, as explained in the previous chapter, the lack of comparative research has left many questions unanswered, many theories insufficiently tested, and many generalizations unchallenged. As a result, focusing

on a set of very similar countries may lead us to underestimate the casual impact of contextual variables on which they do not differ, and whose effects have so far been rather neglected. For instance, little can be said about the role of different electoral systems if we analyze only the United States and the United Kingdom, which share the same first-past-the-post arrangements in general elections.

In this respect, the sample of cases that I have chosen can be considered diverse because, although all countries pertain to a well-defined realm of Western democracies, they differ from one another in many theoretically relevant ways. Important variations can be found among them with respect to technological development, political institutions, political culture, and political context.

In terms of *technological development*, in 2010 the United Kingdom had 85 internet users and 31 broadband subscribers per 100 inhabitants; Germany (82% and 32%) and France (80% and 34%) presented similar patterns; the United States and Australia had slightly lower penetration, with 79% and 76% internet users and 26% and 23% broadband subscribers, respectively; finally, Spain and Italy showed much lower levels of diffusion, with 67% and 54% internet users and 23% and 22% broadband subscribers, respectively.[1] Among established Western democracies, the sample studied here thus includes both technologically advanced countries and states with low internet diffusion (by Western standards).

With respect to *political institutions*, the sample includes one presidential system of government (the United States), one semipresidential system (France), and five parliamentary systems (Australia, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom). Electoral systems also vary substantially: some are majoritarian (first-past-the-post plurality in the United States and United Kingdom, runoff majority in France, preferential majority in Australia) and some are proportional (Germany, Italy, and Spain, with various relevant differences in terms of exclusionary clauses and majority bonuses). Also, as a result of the electoral systems, the party systems in these countries have different mechanics (Sartori 1976): the United States is a pure two-party system; Australia is as well if one considers the long-standing conservative alliance between Liberals and Nationals as one functional party; the United Kingdom has been an effective two-party system, with only Labour and Conservatives competing for government for many decades until the 2010 election produced a

"hung" parliament without a one-party majority, which led to a coalition government between Conservatives and Liberal-Democrats; Spain is effectively a two-party system because only two national parties compete for government, but many regionalist parties enter parliament, and their support is often vital for minority governments; France and Germany are moderate pluralism systems where a limited number of parties compete in homogeneous coalitions, although in Germany grand coalitions between Christian-Democrats and Social-Democrats are not uncommon; Italy is a moderate pluralism system as well, but it is characterized by much greater fragmentation and coalitional instability (Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2010). Another important component of political institutions is the structure of the media system and its relationship with politics: according to the classification by Dan Hallin and Paolo Mancini (2004), the United States and the United Kingdom (and, by extension, Australia) are liberal systems, where the media are closer to the world of business than to that of politics and are thus, broadly speaking, politically independent; Germany is a democratic corporatist system, where both business and politics influence the media, which nonetheless maintain a certain degree of autonomy; France, Italy, and Spain are polarized pluralist systems, where the media are more affected by politics than by business and are thus strongly entangled with political actors. Thus, the seven countries included in this study display a wide range of variation in both the design and functioning of their political institutions, which define the rules of the game and the incentives and resources of individual actors (March and Olsen 1989).

In terms of *political culture*, the degree of support for the political system, the organizational role of political parties, and the intensity of political participation also vary widely across the countries chosen for this research. As an example, 86% of Australians are satisfied with the way democracy works in their country, compared to 68% among Germans and 64% of Americans. In the United Kingdom and Spain satisfaction with democracy is at 59% and 58% respectively, whereas in France and Italy only 51% and 44% respectively are satisfied.[2] Party organizations also differ markedly in their willingness and ability to recruit members: whereas US parties have for a long time abandoned these endeavors at least in terms of permanent subscriptions coupled with membership fees (J. Green 2002), most European parties still strive to recruit members, so that the average ratio between party members and voters between 2007 and 2008 was 5.57 in Italy, 4.36 in Spain, 2.30 in Germany, 1.85 in France, and 1.21 in the United Kingdom (Van Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke

2012); Australian parties have always been weak in terms of recruitment because compulsory voting makes on-the-ground mobilization less relevant (McAllister 2002), resulting in members-to-voters average ratios of 1.5 in the late 1990s (Scarrow 2000). As regards participation, voter turnout, which is the most common form of democratic political engagement, was 94% in the 2010 Australian election (also as a result of compulsory voting), 84% in the 2007 French presidential election, 81% in the 2008 Italian parliamentary election, 75% and 71% respectively in the 2008 Spanish and 2009 German parliamentary elections, 65% in the 2010 UK parliamentary election, and 62% in the 2008 US presidential election. Such variations in political culture, party membership, and basic patterns of participation make this sample sufficiently diverse to represent a vast range of Western democracies.

Finally, with respect to *political context*, the balance of power among parties had different configurations in each country during the time frame of this analysis. In Australia, Spain, and the United States, general elections led to a center-left government; by contrast, in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, the vote produced a center-right government; in Italy, the 2006 elections led to a center-left government and the 2008 elections reversed this outcome. Before the vote, incumbent governments were center-right in France and the United States, center-left in Spain and the United Kingdom, and a grand coalition including both center-right and center-left in Germany. In Australia and Italy, incumbents were first center-right, then center-left in the subsequent election. These variations in the political profile of national government will allow us to assess how incumbency and ideology affect the ways in which parties and citizens engage with digital politics.

Another relevant aspect of this study is its longitudinal extension: it spans the years 2006–10, thus taking a longer view on constantly changing technologies (and their uses) than has been done in most of the research on internet politics so far (for some relevant exceptions, see Foot and Schneider 2006; Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2007; Schweitzer 2011). Studying digital politics longitudinally is important because it can reveal whether and how politicians and voters change their approach to technology as the political context evolves. It permits inclusion of national general elections, which are crucial moments in political communication and do not occur simultaneously in the seven countries studied here.

The units of analysis in this research are not, however, whole countries or political systems, but political organizations and individuals. On the one

hand, I am interested in how parties and candidates take advantage of the affordances of digital media during and outside election campaigns—the *supply side* of digital politics. On the other hand, this study sheds light on how citizens use the internet to inform themselves and to engage in election campaigns—the *demand side* of digital politics. While many studies have focused on one of these two facets, few have addressed both at the same time (Bimber and Davis 2003 and Norris 2003 being notable, but now dated, exceptions). This one-dimensional approach has often led to unrealistic expectations and conclusions regarding the empirical behavior of parties and citizens and provided little knowledge of the intersections between the two.

In my research I addressed the supply side of digital politics through a longitudinal quantitative analysis of the characteristics of parties' and candidates' websites and the demand side through survey data on citizens' attitudes and behaviors during national election campaigns. Regarding both these realms I describe the data I employed and briefly outline my main methodological choices. Readers who are not interested in such details are invited to skip the rest of this chapter, while those interested in greater detail are encouraged to consult the methodological appendix at the end of the book.

Parties and Candidates Online: Analysis of Websites

Studying how political actors employ the affordances of digital media is important because, as Foot and Schneider (2006: 13) note, "To the extent that campaign organizations structure the electoral experience for other political actors," including citizens, "developments in the Web practices of campaign organizations constitute the impact of the Web on politics." Online political communication is a multifaceted domain that includes many different functions and activities, from top-down distribution of contents to bottom-up user feedback to many-to-many communication among citizens.

To address these issues, I assess the extent to which official political websites distribute contents, provide opportunities for participation, and deliver these functions in an accessible and efficient way. Although online campaigning increasingly occurs in web 2.0 environments such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube (Chadwick 2009), studying digital politics through an analysis of institutional websites is the most appropriate research strategy for at least three reasons.

First, official websites are still relevant for parties and candidates because they allow campaigns to define the terms of the interaction, turn user engagement into tangible resources (such as donations and volunteering), and collect transactional data and user profiles that campaigns own and can then use directly, as well as share with their allies. This point is well illustrated by Joe Rospars, Obama's new media director, in a personal interview with the author after the 2008 campaign: "Most of the activities within the social networks . . . were about driving people into specific opportunities on barackobama.com," the candidate's official website (see Vaccari 2010). Parties and candidates try to engage citizens on social media because that is where most people are these days, but they do so in order to attract them on platforms that they control—their institutional websites and applications. Recent developments such as the possibility for campaigns to have their online supporters use their social media credentials to log on campaigns' proprietary engagement platforms—as pioneered in the US 2012 presidential campaign—may further blur the boundaries between institutional websites and social media platforms. However, such distinction was still relevant when data for this research were collected.

Second, as this last consideration highlights, research on constantly evolving digital media and their political uses must strike the right balance between incorporating innovations and obtaining findings that can last beyond each wave of technological change. Thus, I have chosen to study digital politics in a five-year period rather than a single election cycle so that the answers to my research questions would not necessarily become invalid—or simply outdated—in a brief time span. Doing this, in turn, requires looking beyond each individual internet tool or platform and finding reliable indicators of how political actors and citizens approach digital media in the broadest possible sense. In this respect, official websites provide a good baseline proxy for how parties and candidates employ the larger suite of rapidly evolving tools that are now at their disposal, and the ones that will become available in the near future. Granted, each new digital instrument offers different sets of affordances to its potential users and might thus be more or less attractive to different types of political actors and activists, but parties' and candidates' overall approach to the web will maintain a set of enduring characteristics, which are best understood by looking at the most basic and, so far, long-lasting aspect of their larger and expanding web presence, that is, their institutional websites.

Third, official websites are by no means one-dimensional spaces that allow one to observe only a limited set of political functions. Rather, they can develop into broad hubs that encompass different types of activities, from the most passive to the most involving, from the most centralized to the most decentralized, from the most targeted to the most inclusive. Institutional websites integrate many different sets of features that my analysis can not only evaluate individually but also map in order to identify relevant clusters of activities. As will be shown below, tools on official websites can be grouped on the basis of the three main functions of information, participation, and delivery. To the extent that different causal factors explain the development of these specific domains of parties' and candidates' digital presence, such causal patterns might also apply to social media and other online tools that perform comparable functions.

This study relies on a unique dataset that was built incrementally over time and includes a total of 620 websites belonging to 169 parties and candidates (listed in the appendix). Various observations were conducted in each country during both electoral and nonelectoral periods. While parties were the main focus of the analysis, the websites of two types of individual politicians were also included: presidential candidates in France and the United States—where presidents are elected directly by voters and are central political figures—and national party leaders in the remaining five countries. The latter are parliamentary systems but have been increasingly characterized by a "presidentialization" process (Poguntke and Webb 2005), which has made party leaders more prominent than in the past. Each observation included all the parties and candidates that could be considered relevant in the next election on the basis of Sartori's (1976) criteria of coalitional and blackmail potential. Parties (and their candidates and leaders) were thus included when they could be expected to become part of a governing coalition and when they could affect the direction of electoral competition. Because these were prospective rather than retrospective judgments, unfortunately they sometimes left out parties that turned out to be rather successful or to be innovative in their uses of the internet.[3] That being said, retrospective evaluations confirm that all the major political actors in all the electoral and nonelectoral periods were included in the corpus.

A bird's-eye view of the 620 websites that were coded for this project shows that they include:

- 487 (78.5%) websites analyzed during national election campaigns and 133 (21.5%) analyzed outside of election campaigns;
- 81 (13.1%) websites analyzed in 2006, 219 (35.3%) in 2007, 159 (25.6%) in 2008, 118 (19%) in 2009, and 43 (7%) in 2010; and
- 46 (7.4%) in Australia, belonging to 28 political actors; 98 (15.8%) in France, belonging to 32 political actors; 41 (6.6%) in Germany, belonging to 14 political actors; 148 (23.9%) in Italy, belonging to 43 political actors; 39 (6.3%) in Spain, belonging to 13 political actors; 53 (8.5%) in the United Kingdom, belonging to 14 political actors; 195 (31.5%) in the United States, belonging to 25 political actors

The data are thus skewed toward electoral periods because the main focus of this study is on election campaigns, consistent with the fact that the data on citizens come from surveys taken immediately after general election campaigns. Some years—2007 and 2008—are also overrepresented because two particularly protracted campaigns occurred then: the French presidential and legislative cycles, which both involved runoffs and numerous competing actors, and the US presidential cycle, which went through at least three stages: "invisible" primaries, primaries (which incidentally were particularly intense and prolonged in 2008), and the general election. Finally, some countries are overrepresented in the corpus, particularly the United States (as a result of the already mentioned complexity of the crowded US primaries, which increased the number of candidates included in the analysis and required a greater number of observations) and Italy (because it is the only country in the study where three national elections were held in the observed period, two for the national parliament in 2006 and 2008, and one for the European parliament in 2009, and because its fragmented party system required inclusion of a large number of political actors).

As can be inferred from the summary statistics, not all political actors were analyzed with the same frequency: the websites of US presidential candidates Barack Obama and John McCain, as well as those of their respective parties, were coded as many as sixteen times between 2007 and 2008. By contrast, Spanish Socialist Party leader José Luis Rodriguez Zapatero's website was analyzed only once during the 2008 campaign. The reasons for these differences are threefold. First, in some countries, most notably the United States, many more observations were conducted than in others, such as Spain. Because they are much more complex, protracted, and resourceful than is the

case in all other countries studied here, American campaigns must be continuously monitored to account for the competitive and strategic changes that occur throughout the race. Second, some parties came and went during the time frame of the research: for instance, the website of the Italian Democratic Party (founded in 2007) by definition could not be included in the analysis of the 2006 elections; its main competitor, the People of Freedom, was also launched in 2007, but it did not even have an active website until a month before the 2008 general elections; during the 2009 European parliament elections, many small parties (especially in France and Italy) created temporary electoral cartels to pool their votes in order to have a better chance to elect representatives (as parties below a certain country-specific threshold would be excluded from seat allocation), but the websites of these lists were dismantled after the polls closed. Third, most candidates and party leaders did not consistently maintain updated websites throughout the electoral and nonelectoral periods in which I observed them. For instance, British Conservative Party leader David Cameron opened a personal website in late 2006, but in early 2009 decided to close it and incorporate its contents within his party's website.

Because some of the analyses presented in the following chapters employ pooled data for all the 620 websites and the 169 political actors in the seven countries, the numerical imbalances between countries and political actors need to be addressed in order to avoid introducing distortions in the results. To achieve this goal, I chose to weigh the data through a post-stratification algorithm that ensures two outcomes: that *each country has the same weight* irrespective of how many websites within it were analyzed; and that, within each country, *each political actor (party or candidate) has the same weight* no matter how many times the respective website was analyzed.[4] As a result, in the United States the observations of Obama's website will collectively weigh equally as those of Republican primary candidate Tommy Thompson, who dropped out of the race before a single vote was cast. In aggregate analyses, observations of individual German and Spanish websites will weigh as much as those of individual Italian or American websites, although fewer websites were analyzed in the former two countries than in the latter two. Though arbitrary, this decision seems preferable to the possible alternatives of employing no weights, which would have resulted in obvious biases, with overrepresentation of US websites being particularly problematic in light of the reflections

presented earlier on the excessive Americanization of the field; or devising weights based on some proportional rather than egalitarian criteria, such as countries' population sizes, countries' levels of internet diffusion, and parties' and candidates' electoral support. This choice would have been as legitimate methodologically as the equalizing weighting decision that I have made.[5] However, US parties and candidates would have still affected the results more than political actors in other countries, which is precisely what I wanted to avoid given the considerations that prompted this research.

My analysis of the websites takes inspiration from Rachel Gibson and Stephen Ward's (2000) seminal work, which suggests a four-stage analytical process:

1. Devise concepts identifying basic functions of political websites.
2. Operationalize variables that measure specific content features that fulfill such functions.
3. Code websites for the presence or absence of these features.
4. Develop indices to measure how websites perform the identified functions.

Many researchers have relied on Gibson and Ward's approach to analyze political websites empirically (see, e.g., Norris 2003; Gibson et al. 2003; Lusoli and Ward 2005; Farmer and Fender 2005; Foot and Schneider 2006; Gulati and Williams 2007; Latimer 2009). Each study has employed different coding frames and has constructed indices that measure different dimensions, thus making it difficult to compare results across studies, let alone countries. The indices employed in these studies were derived from aggregations between variables (e.g., grouping candidates' biographies and campaign blogs under the rubric of *information* or *campaigning*) that were based on face validity, that is, on how each researcher interpreted the meanings of these categories. Gibson and Ward (2000: 302), however, had recommended that scholars abstain from prejudging the dimensions of website functions and instead adopt "a more flexible method that allows the sites to speak for themselves." In their original proposal, indices were to be derived through factor analysis, which allows the reconstruction of the empirical structure of correlations among variables.

In order to implement Gibson and Ward's suggestions as fully as possible, I devised an initial coding scheme consisting of ninety-six variables. Most of

them are dichotomous and measure the presence or absence of a particular characteristic. A few additional ordinal-level variables provide a more refined measure of the degree to which a website performed a certain function (see the appendix for details on the coding frame). The websites were analyzed in all their publicly accessible pages, including those that required a free registration. The coding was performed in two stages: first, various research assistants provided early assessments, and then the author checked them and finalized the coding; each coding period lasted for two weeks.[6] About two-thirds of the variables were drawn from the studies cited earlier, while one-third consisted of new variables that I introduced to account for online tools that were not relevant when previous research was conducted, including blogs, social networking tools, event-organizing tools, volunteer recruitment tools, publication of user-produced audiovisuals, subscription to mobile phone alerts, and syndication of content through Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds.

Once the websites had been coded, I devised a two-step statistical strategy to construct indices grounded in the empirical reality of the data and comparable with work done by other scholars. First, I employed a dimension reduction statistical technique to identify groups of empirically correlated variables. Second, I complemented these results with a meta-analysis of the coding frames and indices employed in relevant previous studies of political websites.

To identify latent dimensions underlying the empirical distribution of variables, I conducted exploratory analyses combined with a principal components analysis (PCA) on a subset of my sample. This analysis, the details of which can be found in the appendix, identified three relevant dimensions that were easily interpretable and compatible with previous studies.

The first component was defined by four variables: the time required to answer an email asking a question on the party's or candidate's position on taxation (a universally relevant issue and thus suitable for comparison); the presence of podcasts (audiovisual materials that users can subscribe to); the presence of a frequently asked questions (FAQ) page; and the presence of audio clips of, for instance, official statements and radio commercials. Because they all entail ways in which political organizations distribute contents in a one-way fashion, through different forms (personalized, by subscription, and on static pages), and via different media (text and audiovisual),

these variables can be interpreted as performing the function of distributing *information*.

The second component comprised four other variables: offline distribution of online-gathered materials (such as when parties post electronic versions of their leaflets and ask supporters to print and distribute them); the possibility to comment on website pages; the presence of a campaign social networking tool (such as the already mentioned mybarackobama.com or myconservatives .com) or of a link to the campaign's profile on a major social media (such as Facebook or Twitter); and the presence of online polls. All these features allow citizens to engage in political activities, both offline and online, from leafleting to establishing social connections to expressing their opinions. They can thus be characterized as encouraging *participation*.

The categories of information and participation have been widely employed in the literature on political websites. As highlighted by Gulati and Williams (2007: 444–445) in a review of these studies, "Most treatments distinguish between passive informational content and those features or tools that facilitate user manipulation of, or interaction with, the content, other users, and/or the campaign enterprise." The grouping of variables that emerged from my empirical analysis thus corresponds to the theoretical classifications employed by other researchers, which provides a strong case for their validity, as well as allowing comparisons between my findings and those of other researchers.

The third component was identified by the following variables: the average number of emails sent weekly to subscribers; the presence of foreign language translations; the display of interactive maps (e.g., showing campaign offices or party branches, or localizing the projects developed by an outgoing government); and the fact that the website did not present any missing pages, broken links, pages under construction, or any other fault that interrupted the users' navigation flow. All these variables refer to Gibson and Ward's (2000: 308) definition of site *delivery*, which they identify as the websites' "effectiveness in delivering" their political functions and which involve "presentation and appearance, accessibility, navigability, freshness, responsiveness, and visibility."

This classification of website functions as pertaining to information, participation, and delivery is quite satisfactory in terms of the substantive meanings of the three latent dimensions and their comparability with previous research. Because of statistical limitations, however, only twelve variables could

be included in the principal components analysis (with four variables loading on each of the three factors). This number is substantially lower compared with the ninety-six variables included in the original coding frame. Given the many affinities between the theoretical classifications employed by previous scholars and the findings of my PCA, I thus decided to combine the results of the PCA with those of a meta-analysis of the coding frames employed in relevant previous studies on the subject. Such meta-analysis, whose methodology and results are discussed in detail in the appendix, allowed me to build indices that include a much greater number of variables: twenty-one were classified under the information index, twenty-one under the participation index, and fifteen under the delivery index. This choice has made my methodology and findings more comparable with those of relevant existing studies in the field. A total of fifty-seven variables are thus included in the analysis. A brief look at the variables included in the three groups (discussed in chapter 5) illustrates their substantive meanings and confirms the validity of this classification.

Information mainly includes the provision of contents on parties' and candidates' identity and proposals: leader biography and profile, campaign or party organizational chart, speeches and statements, endorsements, values and ideology, issue positions, press clippings, comparisons with opponents' record and platform, and statistics on public policies. It also includes contents that help voters clarify some specific issues, such as information on the electoral law and voting, frequently asked questions, the time required to answer an issue question via email, and the average number of news updates published each week. Furthermore, this category comprises the provision of targeted information (to age groups such as youth and seniors, to voters in different geographic areas, to identity groups such as ethnic minorities, and to interest groups such as business and unions). Finally, it includes availability of audiovisual contents (podcasts, audio clips, and video clips) and the presence of external links that can guide users to other online destinations.

Participation comprises both activities that are confined to the digital realm and others that ripple offline. Among the former are feedback on campaign contents (blog, solicitation of questions via web or email, possibility to comment on pages, online polls) and web-based message exchange (online distribution of campaign materials, discussion forums and chat rooms, email sign-up, downloadable campaign materials, "send this page to a friend," and RSS feeds). Among tools that bridge the online and offline domains are cam-

paign contacts, events calendar, offline distribution of online-gathered materials, event-organizing tools, social networking tools, voter registration and absentee ballot request forms, volunteer sign-up, online fundraising, online gadget store, media contacting tools, and the time required to answer a volunteer pledge by email.

Finally, the delivery variables include measures of usability (accessibility with different browsers, lack of missing or under construction pages, site map, navigation toolbar, return to home page from all internal pages, and internal search engine) and freshness (date when the last update appeared, live-streaming of events, and average number of emails sent weekly). This group also comprises graphical features (cartoons and animations, interactive maps, pictures and graphics outside the main banner, moving objects) and elements related to transparency, such as a privacy policy statement and foreign language translations.

These variables represent various facets of the categories of information, participation, and delivery. They thus allow one to capture the many ways in which websites can perform their political functions. The three groups exhibit a strong internal consistency, as the variables that compose them are semantically contiguous. The classification employed here can thus be considered valid from three different viewpoints: empirical, as it is grounded in the correlations among variables modeled through PCA; conceptual, as my choices take into account the stipulations of other scholars and the meta-analysis that resulted is a step forward toward cumulative research in the field; and theoretical, as the substantive meaning of each variable clearly belongs to one of the three domains. It should be noted, however, that the variables I have measured indicate parties' and candidates' online *efforts* (i.e., how many functions they offer on their websites) and *priorities* (i.e., whether they invest more in top-down dissemination of contents, bottom-up participation, or the functionality of their websites), as they are revealed in the appearance, structure, and functions of their institutional online presence. The results that I will report allow us to understand the sophistication of political actors' digital efforts but can tell us little about their outcomes—whether information is received and understood, whether engagement actually occurs both online and offline, and whether users actually find it easier to locate and perform these functions. What can be found on political websites does not necessarily translate into knowledge, attitude changes, votes, or resources, but it provides a good observation point on how parties and candidates integrate the internet

within their communication repertoires, as well as shaping the political opportunities that citizens encounter online.

Citizens' Online Behavior: Analysis of National Election Surveys

The demand side of digital politics is an obviously relevant issue, but it has rarely been studied scientifically, mostly because of lack of reliable data. National election surveys have started to incorporate questions related to online political behavior, but no large-scale cross-country survey—such as the World Values Survey—has yet featured questions on the use of the internet for political information and participation. Hence, a fully comparative quantitative analysis of citizens' online political behavior is currently not possible.

As a second-best alternative, however, all the national postelectoral surveys in the seven countries featured in this study include at least one question on the use of the internet to get information about politics and the campaign. The American National Election Studies 2008, the Australian Election Study 2007 and 2010, the British Election Study 2010, the French Election Study 2007, the German Longitudinal Election Study 2009, the Italian National Election Studies 2006 and 2008, and the Spanish 2008 survey conducted by the Centro de Investigaciones Sociologicas constitute the most reliable sources of national electoral surveys and thus are widely relied upon within the academic community. Methodological information on the design of the surveys is provided in the appendix and is publicly available on these institutions' websites.

In part III of the book, I analyze these survey data to identify which variables most accurately predict citizens' use of the internet to get information about politics and the campaign. The dependent variable in each country thus measures whether respondents used the internet to get information about the last national election. The act of getting campaign news and updates online can be seen as the first step in a ladder of political engagement (Berger 2009) that may lead citizens to more committed and demanding web-based activities, such as connecting with candidates on social media, signing up as volunteers, posting their views and comments on blogs, donating money, and attending or organizing offline events through web tools. Campaign staffs are well aware that capturing online audiences is a crucial first step because,

once citizens have been engaged, the internet affords many opportunities to ask them to take part in different types of activities (Vaccari 2010). After they have established an online connection with the campaign, supporters can switch to many other web-based political endeavors, moving, for instance, from reading a candidate's biography to subscribing to email updates to making a financial contribution after receiving a fundraising email (Vaccari 2013b).

Getting political information through the web can thus be considered as the baseline of online political engagement. That this is the case is shown, for instance, by a study based on a 2008 US survey that included measures of various types of online political activities. The results identify a clear hierarchy in the ways in which citizens participate in politics through the web: 63% acquired political information, 38% engaged in political communication (discussing and exchanging messages with other citizens), 16% took part in political mobilization (such as donating and volunteering), and 10% performed some political activities on social networking sites. Getting campaign information was strongly, positively, and significantly correlated with all other, less common online political activities (Nam and Stromer-Galley 2012: 137–138, 144). Thus, political information is not only the most common type of web-based form of engagement but is also generally an antecedent, if not a cause, of other, more demanding and potentially impactful activities.

In some countries, national electoral surveys measured online political information through a simple dichotomous, yes-or-no question. Others, however, employed more nuanced frequency categories, such as the number of days in a typical week when a respondent had used the internet or more subjective response modes such as often, sometimes, rarely, and never. In order to compare these different measures across countries, I have reduced those that were not dichotomous to yes or no (1 or 0) values. Although this choice obviously reduces the precision of the original variables, it allows the comparison of different measurements of similar phenomena across countries. This first step toward building multivariate logistic regression models whose results can be compared across countries will, in turn, enable us to answer questions on the characteristics that predict online political behavior of citizens in various different Western democracies.

My measure of engagement with internet politics does merit two cautionary notes. First, as Marcus Prior (2009) has shown with respect to television news, survey respondents tend to overreport the frequency of their media

exposure. Whereas these self-reports tend to be consistent, thus ensuring reliability, they are not accurate, thus compromising validity. Although no study that I am aware of has assessed the validity of self-reports of exposure to particular contents on the internet, similar issues may affect them. This danger further corroborates my choice to transform frequency categories into binary measures of exposure, as the latter are less likely to be inflated—citizens who report no exposure, after all, by definition cannot inflate their actual exposure (Prior 2009: 135). The second limit of the exposure measure that I relied on is that it is very broad and, thus, quite prone to lumping together engagement with many types of online sources and contents that, ideally, should be distinguished from each other. A nonexhaustive list may include party and candidate websites, government websites, political news on the sites of established mass media, political blogs, citizen forums, websites of civic groups and associations, and the panoply of contents generated and shared through social media. It is my hope that future survey research will be able to address both these issues through externally validated and more specific measures. For the time being, however, the measures I relied on, although by no means perfect, are the best that are available for a cross-country comparison of this sort.

On the basis of the research questions developed in this chapter, citizens' exposure to online political information has been entered as the dependent variable in multivariate logistic regression models that include four types of independent variables:

1. *Sociodemographic characteristics*: gender, race, age, education, urban density, and income
2. *Political culture*: church attendance, interest in politics, sense of efficacy, trust in parties or government, ideology, and party identification
3. *Offline political engagement*: talking about politics with other people, attending rallies and campaign events, and volunteering for parties or candidates
4. *Mass media usage*: reading newspapers and watching political programs on television

As opposed to those involving political websites, these analyses are conducted on a country-by-country basis rather than on a pooled cross-country dataset because the survey and questionnaire designs differ from country to country

and thus cannot be conflated into a single dataset. The results obtained in country-by-country analyses, however, can be compared through a qualitative meta-analysis that will help highlight similarities and differences in the factors affecting citizens' online political behavior in the seven Western democracies included in this research.

CHAPTER THREE

Parties and the Internet

There is broad scholarly consensus on the idea that "parties have adapted more quickly to new media technologies than to any previous technological advance" (Ward 2008: 1–2). From bulletin boards to email, from websites to audiovisual content, from blogs to social media, most parties and candidates have hastened to establish a presence on any genre of digital communication that has been made available to them.

On the other hand, a similarly broad agreement exists among researchers that institutional political actors have missed most of the opportunities offered by the internet. While parties are generally at ease with providing information on web platforms they can control, they are much more cautious when it comes to allowing and encouraging supporters to participate in autonomous and consequential online activities (Nixon, Ward, and Gibson 2003). Lately, scholars have even noted a backward tendency by which "even when earlier efforts included interactivity, party and candidate web masters have steered away from it more recently" (Davis et al. 2008: 260). Sara Bentivegna (2006) notes that parties have adopted internet tools merely to enhance their internal rather than external communication. In the process, they have

reproduced the same centrally controlled relationships and contents that exist offline (see also Ward and Vedel 2006).

The prevailing approach to digital media among institutional political actors has been rather reluctant. As suggested by proponents of the normalization theory (see chapter 1), the internet has not significantly changed party organization and communication. Four different, most likely complementary, explanations have been offered.

First, parties and candidates are afraid to lose control over their communications, particularly during election campaigns, and thus prefer using the web to disseminate information rather than to encourage interaction (Stromer-Galley 2000). Accordingly, analyses of campaign websites have often found information features to outnumber engagement opportunities (Gibson et al. 2003; Foot and Schneider 2006; Druckman, Kifer and Parkin 2007; Vaccari 2008b).

Second, long-standing institutionalized organizations tend to evolve incrementally rather than through radical transformations of the kind envisioned by many cyber utopians. Gradual adoption has been parties' favored path not only for the internet but also for radio and television (Ward, Gibson, and Nixon 2003: 32–33). On the basis of the business literature, David Karpf (2012) suggests that we should expect industry leaders to be at the forefront of "sustaining innovations," those that improve performance without changing products and markets, but not of "disruptive innovations," those that develop new products for markets that did not exist before. Disruptive innovations are pioneered by new entrants that have no vested interests in the market's current configuration and would benefit from the breaking of the present equilibrium. In the realm of politics, this implies that actors operating in more static markets, such as political parties, have fewer incentives to develop disruptive innovations, whereas those facing a more fluid environment—such as interest groups, civic associations, and social movements—are more likely to do so. Political parties that are more established and thus benefit from the status quo should be more likely to pursue sustaining innovations, whereas those that are less powerful may have a greater interest in seeking disruptive innovations.

Third, institutional political actors are well aware that all their actions are destined to undergo intense scrutiny by the (widely disaffected) public and the (increasingly cynical) mass media. Parties, candidates, and governments thus fear that, should their innovations fail, the costs of the bad publicity

that would result far outweigh the potential benefits of success (Ward and Vedel 2006: 220). This schizophrenic view adds uncertainty to any decision involving the uptake of a set of technologies whose constant development already makes it hard to predict success and avoid failure.

Finally, early gloomy conclusions about the adoption of digital media by parties and candidates may simply have been premature because fully implementing innovations throughout complex organizations requires time. Ward and Vedel (2006: 224) remind us that "analyzing the role of television in the 1950s, some 30 years after it first emerged, would have underestimated its eventual impact." Institutional political actors may not be doomed to miss all the digital opportunities that are available to them. For instance, a study of party websites during the 2009 European Parliament elections in France, Germany, Great Britain, and Poland has documented a significant degree of interactivity on these platforms, particularly through social networking and file sharing. As a result, the authors conclude that "we find a range of party web presences offering a rich experience that combines engaging features with the delivery of information" (Lilleker et al. 2011: 208). Negative assessments of parties' adoption of digital media have often resulted from what I have already referred to as "unhelpful comparisons" with a few high-profile American experiences (such as Dean and Obama) that are outliers even in the quite exceptional context of the United States, rather than from country-sensitive, realistic empirical assessments. This standard is all the more unreasonable given that, even in supposedly tech-savvy and resource-rich American politics, spectacular success stories such as Obama's are exceptions to the rule of relatively lame efforts among candidates and lackluster response among voters (Vaccari and Nielsen 2012).

These considerations suggest that digital media adoption by parties and candidates must not be treated like an all-or-nothing question, as the normalization theory would have it. Nor should digital politics be evaluated on the basis of normative assumptions regarding good and bad, sufficient and insufficient uses of technology. A much more promising research endeavor, to which this book aims to contribute, employs the *comparative method* to investigate the *empirical conditions* under which *different political actors* choose to adopt *different aspects* of internet communications. As other scholars have suggested, testable empirical hypotheses to explain these phenomena can be derived from a three-layered causal model, with two layers situated at the systemic (macro) level and one at the organizational (meso) level. After summariz-

ing these hypotheses based on the groundwork laid in particular by Rachel Gibson and Stephen Ward (Nixon, Ward, and Gibson 2003: 241; Ward 2008: 10; Ward and Gibson 2009), I will test these propositions in part II of this book through empirical evidence on parties' and candidates' web presence.

At the system level, *technological development*—that is, the diffusion of internet connections, the availability of broadband, and the level of internet skills among the population—should affect the incentives (or lack thereof) that political actors have in establishing and maintaining their online presence, as well as citizens' expectations of it. For instance, an early study by Pippa Norris (2001: 9) found that "the strongest and most significant indicator of the presence of all parties online is technological diffusion, measured by the proportion of the population online." A digitally advanced communication environment should thus be conducive to greater investment and experimentation by political actors, while they may be expected to be less innovative in a country that lags behind in the digital economy and in the diffusion of internet culture.

Also at the system level, the *sociopolitical environment* comprises both the institutional context and citizens' demand for different forms of political communication. With respect to institutions, arrangements such as the distribution of power between different levels of governance, patterns of party competition, type of election (i.e., presidential versus parliamentary, general versus second-order, national versus local), and the electoral system determine the institutional "rules of the game." These in turn affect the ways in which individual actors perceive their interests and incentives, consistently with the neo-institutional paradigm (March and Olsen 1989; Peters 1996). Institutional characteristics may thus influence the competitive pressures and incentives that affect how different political actors communicate online. With respect to citizens, political culture—that is, citizens' knowledge, attitudes, and evaluations regarding the political system (Almond and Verba 1963; Norris 1999, 2011)—and political participation in its various forms (e.g., voter turnout, membership in and volunteering with political organizations, attending rallies, and discussing politics with friends and family) define the demand side of political communication (Kluver 2005). Citizen attitudes may be particularly relevant in shaping the production of online political communication because digital media allow and encourage users to select the contents they are exposed to and the activities they engage in (Bimber and Davis 2003). As Chadwick (2006: 175) suggests, the internet is a "lean-forward" rather

than a "lean-backward" medium. Therefore, political actors cannot direct (and invade) citizens' attention on the web in the same way as they can do with posters, television advertisements, or earned media coverage, which to a certain degree reach audiences inadvertently. As a result, parties and candidates may be more motivated to invest on internet platforms if they are confident that they will find captive and benign audiences rather than if they are afraid that their messages will fall on deaf or malevolent ears. As online campaign managers know well, there is nothing less depressing than a blog with zero comments or a social media presence that attracts only a handful of supporters—apart from a blog with thousands of negative comments or mockery of the candidate spread virally through social media. Thus, when they believe that demand for political engagement is small or antagonistic, politicians may be more inclined to keep a low profile on the web rather than overreaching—not least because of the "fear factor" mentioned above.

Finally, at the organizational level, *party characteristics* mainly involve two aspects: resources and incentives. For parties (and candidates) with great sums of money at their disposal and large and skilled staffs on their payrolls, the opportunity costs of online communication are lower than for parties that need to make ends meet with fewer moneys and personnel.[1] Thus, richer parties should have stronger online communication apparatuses than poorer ones. On the basis of early findings that upheld this hypothesis in the United States, Margolis and Resnick (2000: 16) proposed their well-known theory of "normalization," according to which offline disparities tend be reproduced rather than reverted online, thus neutralizing any leveling potential that some optimists attributed to digital media: "If we ask which political parties are likely to provide sophisticated Web sites, the answer is clear: those who command the resources to hire the talent to produce them."

Incentives include, first, established organizational structures, procedures, and preferences. Parties whose internal organization intensely and diffusely involves grass-roots activists in bottom-up endeavors may be more at ease with online communication than those which prevailingly employ a strict command-and-control approach (Löfgren and Smith 2003). Another relevant incentive may be the party's challenger status, which may push even reluctant out-of-power organizations to adopt innovations in hopes of returning to government. By contrast, incumbent parties and candidates may be more complacent and conservative in the face of change or simply too absorbed in the business of government to realize the need to modify their media strate-

gies (Gibson and Römmele 2001). Finally, party characteristics may affect their online efforts in the sense that parties of particular ideological families may find it easier than others to adapt to digital media. Three mechanisms may be responsible: their key decision makers and organizational structures are more inclined toward the type of communication fostered by the internet; the types of voters they court are more likely to be online or more willing to engage online (see chapter 4); and transnational networks that connect similar parties in different countries help diffuse innovation within the same party family, sometimes through international consultancies such as the already mentioned Blue State Digital (Plasser and Plasser 2002).

The history of campaign communications has already shown asymmetrical developmental trajectories among different party types and families. As mass bureaucratic leftist parties thrived in Western Europe, Maurice Duverger (1954) wrote that their electoral and organizational success would generate a "contagion from the left," forcing conservative parties to adopt similar models. In the following decade, Leon Epstein (1967) observed that conservatives were embracing televised campaigning more effectively than progressives and predicted an upcoming "contagion from the right." These prophecies turned out to be speculative, as parties were slower and more resistant to change than the contagion theories predicted. As a result, some performance gaps that could be found in the use of certain campaign channels and techniques at a given point in time turned out to be quite lasting. Parties had to reconcile the need to adopt campaigning and organizational innovations with the imperative to satisfy the preferences of their elites and loyalists, who either preferred incremental change or no change at all. Whether the same pattern applies to digital media is an important empirical question that has received little attention so far because the internet has mostly been treated inaccurately as a uniform technology that would diffuse in similar ways across different contexts and among different organizations (see chapter 1). Finally, various studies have claimed that extremist parties, particularly those on the radical right, may be more likely to take advantage of online tools because they have more difficult access to the mainstream media and cultivate relatively small cadres of dedicated supporters who eagerly engage with one another within the comfortably segregated echo chamber of the internet (Copsey 2003; Bratten 2005).

The framework that I have just summarized stems from comparative research and takes into consideration both structural and organizational factors that differ from country to country (and party to party). However, many

theories and hypotheses regarding the supply side of digital politics have been born out of analyses of the US context. Normalization, for instance, has been developed with respect to the differences in online communication between American major and minor parties (Margolis, Resnick, and Levy 2003). While resource disparities have been found to affect the quality of party and candidate websites in other countries (see, e.g., Schweitzer 2011), exceptions to the rule have also been noted in systems that feature more than two competitive parties (e.g., Cunha et al. 2003). Even in the United States, normalization has not been found to apply consistently to intraparty competition: research on presidential primaries within the Republican and Democratic parties has so far failed to detect significant correlations between candidate resources and the characteristics of their websites (Foot and Schneider 2006; Vaccari 2013a). It is true that US minor parties face an uphill battle online, but the reason may not have to do with any particular property of the internet. More plausibly, it may be related to the almost insurmountable and long-established competitive obstacles in fundraising, regulations, and media that they structurally have to face (Rosenstone, Behr, and Lazarus 1996). The plurality, first-past-the-post electoral system that is ubiquitous in US politics provides few incentives for small parties to campaign in an aggressive and entrepreneurial way. That is because they have no chances of winning seats unless their votes are concentrated in a few districts where they can achieve a plurality (Sartori 1994). By contrast, small parties in multiparty parliamentary systems with proportional representation face more promising incentives. Depending on how selective the electoral system is, they may have concrete opportunities to elect some representatives and, in turn, influence government coalition formation and aspire to some executive offices and policy-making clout (Budge and Keman 1990). As a result, minor parties in proportional systems can be expected to campaign more aggressively and innovatively than their counterparts in countries where representatives are elected with majoritarian systems, particularly first-past-the-post. Normalization may thus be conditional on particular institutional incentives rather than being universal to democratic political systems and related to any intrinsic property of the internet. Kim Strandberg (2008: 238) reached precisely this conclusion in a qualitative comparative meta-analysis of eleven studies and sixteen countries. According to his research, a pluralitarian electoral system is the first and most compelling minimum logical condition for normalization of online competition.

In a similar vein, the idea that parties in opposition may be more eager to transform their communications than those in government has been articulated by Matthew Kerbel (2009) and, with greater precision, by David Karpf (2012) with respect to the progressive community in the United States in the second half of the last decade. This notion, however, may apply differently in majoritarian and proportional systems and "visions" of democracy (Powell 2000). In the former, a winner-takes-all logic informs the choices of the major parties, as their only opportunity for capturing power is to win a popular majority in the next elections. In the latter, electoral success is only one possible avenue to power, as parties that lose or fail to gain votes in an election can still access government and affect policy making by entering a majority coalition in parliament. In these systems, parties in opposition are not necessarily as pressured as their counterparts in majoritarian democracies to modernize their campaigning techniques because an alternative avenue to government and policy influence is available. Coalitional arrangements thus may thwart electoral losses and constitute a short-term insurance policy against electoral decline or failure for the party and its key decision makers. This escape route might reduce the incentives to adopt those changes that are necessary to revive the party's electoral fortunes. Karpf (2012) argues that the transformation of party communications occurs partly via intraparty competition among elites of different ideological persuasions and organizational preferences. Such a contest is faster and more open when parties are in opposition—or, as Gibson and Römmele (2001) suggest, after a clear electoral defeat. An internal reshuffling may be expected to occur more quickly and thoroughly in party organizations that are fluid, lean, internally competitive, and voter-oriented, such as US parties, while they may be slower and less sweeping in more structured, internally consensual, and membership-focused European parties.[2] Intraparty competition in US major parties is generally decided through the presidential primary process. The length, cost, intensity, and candidate-centeredness of these elections have no equivalent among other Western democracies. Outside the United States, party competition tends to be less inclusive (being decided by party elites). Even when members and supporters can vote for their leader (as in the Italian Democratic Party) or presidential candidate (as in the French Socialist Party), these campaigns are much shorter and less resource intensive than American presidential primaries. Thus, aspiring party leaders in Western democracies other than the United States have fewer incentives to embrace innovations to mobilize resources, as

they compete in campaigns that are less demanding or more focused on insiders and midlevel elites.

In sum, opposition parties in different countries may have similar *incentives* to innovate their communication strategies, as electoral failure in competitive contexts triggers ambition and the urge to change. However, they may not have the same *ability* to complete this task rapidly because the internal power struggles that need to be fought before a consensus on the new strategy is established cannot be resolved as quickly and clearly as the competitive conditions and technological developments may demand. The stage on which these internal fights occur is less conducive to innovation than in the long, costly, candidate-centric, and highly mobilizing US presidential primaries.

CHAPTER FOUR

Citizens and the Internet

Although political elites' uses of the internet importantly structure the field of digital politics, citizens ultimately determine their success by employing or avoiding online political tools. Thus, an important line of research on internet politics has focused on the causes and consequences of citizens' information and participation on the web. Many studies have modeled internet use as an *independent* variable and have tried to estimate its effects on political knowledge, interest, and participation (for a useful review, see Mossberger and Tolbert 2010; for a meta-analysis, see Boulianne 2009), and comparative research is starting to develop in this area (Anduiza, Jorba, and Jensen 2012). This book is only tangentially involved in this debate and focuses instead on online information (understood as a precondition of broader political engagement) as a *dependent* variable. In other words, my goal is to identify factors that explain how and why citizens' online behavior varies both between and within different countries' populations. Rather than the *consequences*, I am interested in the *causes* of online political behavior.

The reasons why a focus on online political engagement as a dependent variable is preferable are twofold. First, research on the effects of various

types of internet use on political behavior has struggled to establish causality due to *endogeneity* (Boulianne 2009). Endogeneity results from the fact that, when a correlation between internet use and, say, voting is found in a cross-section survey, it may be caused by a genuine effect of internet use on voting or may indicate that citizens who are more likely to vote also use the internet more than the rest of the population. Second, and consequently, such causal relationships detected in survey data collected at one point in time only, like those employed for this and most other related research, are difficult to disentangle. The safest way to avoid endogeneity issues is to use longitudinal survey data; however, such data have been rare in research on internet politics and nonexistent in comparative studies of the field—including the present one. Thus, treating online behavior as a dependent variable is both less controversial in light of the findings of previous research and more appropriate given the nature of the available data.

A useful framework to study online information has been provided by Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry Brady (1995) in their classic study of civic voluntarism and political participation in the United States.[1] To explain why people do not participate in politics (and, conversely, why they do), the authors famously suggested three possible answers:

1. They "can't," as they lack some necessary *resources* (chiefly time, money, and skills).
2. They "don't want to," because of limited psychological *engagement* with the political realm (as reflected in political interest, sense of efficacy, preferences, and ideology).
3. "Nobody asked," which implies deficiencies in the *recruitment* networks surrounding them, including prompts by political actors as well as interactions in social institutions such as the workplace, churches, and civic organizations (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995: 16).

As well as contributing to explaining offline participation, these three broad sets of factors can help us understand online information and participation and can be helpfully related to existing research on digital politics.

Citizens do not engage with politics online in part because they "can't," that is, they do not have the possibility to access the internet and use it effectively. Under the vast rubric of the *digital divide*, scholars have investigated

inequalities related to gender, age, race, education, income, urban density, and computer- and internet-related skills. Most research has found that people who are male, younger, white, better educated, more affluent, living in urban areas, and more skilled tend to be more likely to access the internet, enjoy the benefits of high-speed connections, and take advantage of a vast array of information and engagement opportunities online (Norris 2001; DiMaggio et al. 2004; Van Dijk 2005; Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal 2008; Min 2010). Thus, online politics by and large reproduces the same inequalities in political participation that are found offline (Mossberger 2009: 176; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2010: 498; Nam and Stromer-Galley 2012: 145). Groups that are more likely to use the internet because they have more money, time, and civic skills are also more likely to take an active part in other political domains (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995: 288–368). The lone exception is age, as younger voters' greater connectedness and superior internet skills translate to some degree into higher political engagement online, whereas they tend to participate much less than older citizens offline. Save from age inequalities, however, most findings imply that the internet may expand rather than reduce the existing gaps in political participation, thus diminishing the breadth of voices that politicians listen to and, in turn, distorting political representation and weakening political equality (Best and Krueger 2005). If internet use does indeed promote political interest and participation, as research tentatively suggests (Boulianne 2009), then political inequalities may increase even further owing to the mobilizing influence of the web. In this scenario, privileged groups that are more likely to use the internet may become even more engaged, while disadvantaged groups that are less connected may not experience a comparable participatory boost (Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2010). Thus, Margolis and Resnick (2000: 209) conclude that digital politics is normalized at the citizen as well as the elite level, claiming that "the evidence shows that those who have been powerful in the past—the established organizations, the wealthy, and the privileged—are moving into cyberspace and taking their advantage with them. . . . Almost certainly, no significant shift in power from the haves to the have-nots will occur."

While many scholars have focused on resource imbalances as drivers of online political inequalities, others have argued that the internet may result in greater political inequalities because most citizens lack the *motivations* to benefit from the wealth of information and participation opportunities that

can be found on the web. In other words, they "don't want to" engage with (internet) politics, and the fact that technology may make it easier to participate does not change that. Motivations are an important driver of inequality in all types of media use and political engagement, but they may be even more relevant on the internet since it elicits "selectivity" from citizens because of the large volume of information it offers, the great diversity of sources it hosts, and the many and continuous opportunities to choose that it affords users (Bimber and Davis 2003: 151–152). As a result, Bruce Bimber and Richard Davis (2003) found that party and candidate supporters rather than undecided voters constitute the majority of the audience for campaign websites. Their visitors thus tend to be more informed, interested, and engaged in politics than the rest of the population.

While Bimber and Davis focused on the 2000 campaign cycle in the United States, Norris reached a similar conclusion from data gathered in a survey of European citizens in the same year. She concluded that, because party websites are visited by voters who tend to be already knowledgeable and active in politics, the internet is a vehicle for "preaching to the converted" (Norris 2003: 24) rather than for persuading undecided voters or mobilizing previously inactive citizens. Because people who are active on the web are already engaged in politics, online participation is by and large seen as supplemental and ancillary to offline political behavior (Ward and Vedel 2006: 214). Similarly, in an analysis of survey data of European voters during the 2004 European parliamentary elections, Wainer Lusoli (2005: 262) noted that "the internet goes hand-in-hand with citizen-centered campaigns, where the individual takes a more active role in information gathering." Lusoli found that use of the web to acquire campaign news was mostly associated with relatively demanding offline information and participation endeavors, such as reading newspapers, discussing politics with friends and family, and attending rallies and public meetings. As claimed by Margolis and Resnick (2000: 212), "To be sure, the Net is now and will continue to be a boon to those who already have an active and sustained interest in public affairs, but there is little evidence that the Internet by itself will increase the attentive public."

Because engaging with online politics requires some effort and motivation, many citizens who lack such interest choose to avoid politics altogether. This strategy is arguably easier to implement online than in other media environments because of the wide range of choices afforded by the internet. In his analysis of US aggregate data, Matthew Hindman (2008: 60, 81) shows

that less than one-tenth of 1% of overall web traffic is directed to political sites and that only 3% involves news and media sites; just a tiny minority of search engine queries has to do with politics. These collective outcomes are the result of individual preferences for, and online choices of, nonpolitical contents. Markus Prior (2007: 114, 121) finds that, for citizens who prefer entertainment over news, the wider choice that results from availability of an internet connection fosters more opportunities to avoid political information, thus contributing to decreasing political knowledge and electoral participation among these voters. As Prior (2007: 137; see also 267) highlights, this phenomenon is conceptually and empirically different from the digital divide. Whereas the digital divide entails resource-based exclusion of people independently of their preferences, the divide between information and entertainment seekers depends on "*voluntary* segmentation of the electorate." That is, participatory inequalities are rooted in citizens' motivations rather than resources and in expanded rather than reduced opportunities. Both Hindman and Prior thus argue that the internet is allowing informed and engaged voters to become even more informed and engaged through the same motivation-based selection mechanisms that are reducing information and engagement among citizens who are detached from politics. Whereas the former take advantage of the selectivity afforded by the internet to expand their political information and participation, the latter do so to isolate themselves from political contents and interactions. At the aggregate level, unequally motivated citizens exercising greater choice may result in audience fragmentation and polarization (Tewksbury and Rittenberg 2009).

An often overlooked component of motivations may have to do with the fact that, as Knut Heidar (2006: 308) has argued, "different parties are expected to attract different kinds of people, and to shape them through different party cultures." While the political cultures of party elites and activists do not perfectly mirror one another, it is reasonable to expect a certain degree of consistency between them. Supporters of different parties may be differently motivated to engage with online politics for at least two reasons. First, followers of parties in opposition may be more likely to turn to digital media in order to compensate for the fact that parties out of government generally receive less coverage and are portrayed less favorably in the mass media. Second, citizens who support parties that emphasize grass-roots democracy and are structured in a more inclusive way may also be more eager to be politically active both online and offline.

Finally, even if citizens have the resources and motivations that are required to engage with internet politics, they are less likely to do so if "nobody asked" them to. Conversely, personal recommendations and directions on why and how to participate may be particularly valuable in the high-choice online environment, where both opportunities and distractions abound. Schlozman, Verba, and Brady (2010: 496; see also Howard 2006) note that "the various Web-based capacities ranging from e-mail to social networking sites make it nearly costless to multiply the number of specially crafted messages to selected publics." Brian Krueger (2006) confirms these claims in his analysis of email-based mobilization, which he finds to be more inclusive than offline mobilization. Because the marginal costs of email communication are practically null, a political organization can afford to send messages to any citizen who is on its list. The selection of who receives mobilization messages, however, no longer depends on the soliciting organization but instead on the citizens who voluntarily submit their email addresses to the organization's website or have established a connection with its social media presence. Because social networking sites and web 2.0 environments are now integrated with people's everyday lives, they can result in unintended exposure to mobilizing contents through individuals' social networks rather than purposive campaigns by political actors (Chadwick 2009: 30).

Online recruitment networks may thus be more dense, continuous, and inclusive than their offline counterparts. Mobilizing incentives to online participation may also derive from the supply of engagement opportunities by institutional political actors. Different parties and candidates approach digital media with distinctive strategies and tactics, which are reflected in the amounts of resources they invest, their top-down or bottom-up orientation, and their preferences for distributing information vis-à-vis stimulating participation. All these supply-side characteristics may affect citizen demand to the extent that they result in different (and differently intensive) calls for mobilization and opportunities for engagement among political actors' various constituencies. For instance, in his analysis of the progressive online movement, Karpf (2012) notes that the US progressive community has been both more innovative at the elite level and more energized at the supporter level, thus producing both a strong infrastructure built from the top down and a lively activist base from the ground up. Meso-level parties' and candidates' internet strategies may thus result in different types and degrees of micro-

level patterns of online mobilization of their supporters. As a result, different types and numbers of people may be "asked" to get engaged via digital media.

Just as most of the literature and many of the theories and hypotheses about institutional political actors' online communications have been developed in the United States, the same notion also applies to research on citizens' online political behavior. For instance, although the concept of the digital divide has been usefully employed in both country-level and cross-country studies of digital inequalities (see, e.g., Guerrieri and Bentivegna 2011), it has been observed that "the United States is the homeland of the digital divide concept and discussion" (Van Dijk 2005: 191). Similar claims can also be made for many other established theories of online political behavior. Yet the United States differs significantly from other Western democracies in terms of social stratification, political participation and mobilization, and policies related to internet access and use. All these differences may in turn affect the ways in which political inequalities manifest themselves on the web, making the American case distinctive and thus difficult to generalize to other countries.

With respect to social stratification, the US population includes a large and diverse share of minorities, large parts of whom enjoy citizenship and voting rights (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Garcia 2003). This situation is not common in most European countries (Koopmans 2000). Income inequalities are significantly greater in the United States than in most other Western democracies (Glaeser 2006; Brandolini and Smeeding 2008). Because they are so prominent and politically consequential in the United States, ethnicity and income may affect digital politics there more than elsewhere. Thus, it may be true, as Schlozman, Brady, and Verba (2010: 498) claim, that there is "no evidence that politics on the Web is ameliorating the class-based inequalities that have so long characterized American politics." At the same time, however, internet-based participatory disparities may be less dramatic in countries where offline divides in political engagement have historically been less pronounced.

In terms of political participation and mobilization, the United States stands out vis-à-vis most established Western democracies in many respects. First and foremost, at least since the 1890s American parties have not recruited a dues-paying membership and have adopted catchall electoral strategies based on cross-cutting appeals to voters rather than mobilizing the party faithful (Schudson 1998; Ware 2006). No socialist party, for example, aimed at and

capable of mobilizing the working classes, ever developed in the United States (Epstein 1967). Thus, the extent of political mobilization generated by American political parties has consistently been lower than in other developed democracies (Conway 2000). While European parties have taken a similar centrist turn since the 1970s, which led them to downscale their on-the-ground structures and apparatuses (Kirchheimer 1966; Katz and Mair 1995; Crotty 2006), they have maintained an organizational legacy of their mass-party stage. In Germany, for instance, the most common party model is the *Volkspartei*, which is "mainly concerned with the integration of different social, economic and cultural values, opinions and attitudes of all or at least a large share of citizens into the political decision-making process" (Jun 2011: 204). Toward that end, such parties maintain an articulated and widespread structure of recruitment and participation.

One of the results of the differential developments of American and European party organizations throughout most of the twentieth century is that voter turnout in the United States has been significantly lower than in almost all other Western democracies (Blais 2007). Most research suggests that the main cause has to do with comparatively weak mobilization efforts by American political parties (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Endersby, Petrocik, and Shaw 2006). In turn, this has resulted in "a middle-class [and] consistently underrepresented electorate" in the United States compared to Europe (Crotty 2006: 504). While the internet dovetails with an increasingly visible strategic reorientation of American campaigns toward larger and more effective field operations (R. K. Nielsen 2012), patterns of political mobilization in the United States maintain a distinct profile compared to most other Western democracies because of these historical differences. In particular, the lack of a strong, working-class party has opened a participatory gap between the more and less affluent voters that has no equivalent in other Western democracies (Sartori 1987: 105). At the same time, Americans as a whole are characterized by a more "participant" political culture (Almond and Verba 1963) than citizens of most other democracies, and the historic robustness and liveliness of American civil society are well known since Alexis de Tocqueville (1835) documented it. Comparative surveys show that US citizens tend to participate more than others in communal activities and to engage in campaign-related endeavors at levels comparable with populations of other democracies. However, they tend to be less likely to vote and to entertain particularized contacts with politicians (Verba, Nie, and Kim 1987). As such, American soci-

ety and politics are distinctive among Western democracies in terms of the drivers, distribution, and main outlets of citizens offline participation. These differences in turn beg the question whether theories of online political behavior developed mostly in the United States are to some extent dependent on the particular contours of political engagement in that country, especially in light of the crucial role of motivations in online participation.

Finally, governmental policies that aim to foster digital development and inclusion can significantly affect the diffusion of internet access and skills, which are conducive to online political engagement (Mossberger, Tolbert, and MacNeal 2008). Significant differences in policy approaches, outputs, and implementation exist across Western democracies (see Van Dijk 2005: 191–205). In particular the United States, with its emphasis on library access, connectivity in rural areas, and recent developments toward municipal internet (Mossberger, Tolbert, and MacNeal 2008: 150–156), has faced challenges and provided solutions different from those of most other developed democracies, which may lead to distinctive configurations in its populations' internet access, habits, and skills.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Structure and Features of Political Websites

In the 2008 Spanish general elections, incumbent prime minister José Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, a member of the Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) faced Popular Party's (PP) leader Mariano Rajoy in a close contest. As the first national election after the surprising 2004 win by the Socialists, which many believed had been fostered by the digital mobilization that followed the terrorist attacks in Madrid three days before the election (Dader 2008), there were high expectations that a vibrant campaign would take place on the web.

The two main parties employed a vast array of internet tools, first of all to market themselves to voters through their leaders and policy positions. Both the PSOE and the PP, for instance, opened YouTube channels, where television advertisements and videos produced solely for the web were available. Their websites offered a large number of pages detailing the parties' policy positions and the latest statements by their main officials. Various website contents were also targeted to specific subgroups within the electorate—in particular, the Socialists addressed groups as diverse as small business owners, college students, immigrants, environmentalists, women, and LGBT; both the

PSOE and PP reached out to young citizens with dedicated sections on their websites. As a result, Spanish voters who went on the main parties' websites could find many ways in which to acquire various types of information about the campaign.

Users who were not content with simply retrieving contents also encountered many opportunities to actively engage with parties and their leaders through their websites. The PSOE built a web platform, linked to both the party's and its candidate's websites, named La mirada positiva (The Positive Look), where users could submit their policy ideas and address questions to the prime minister. The party also created a "cyberprogressive volunteers" platform, where supporters could sign up to receive calls for action to help the campaign on the web—for instance, by voting in media online polls or arguing for the party's positions on influential blogs. The PP matched these efforts with the "popular volunteers" section on its website and organized an internet contest titled "Your proposal in thirty seconds," where participants could submit their self-produced videos, the best of which would eventually become an official campaign advertisement. In order to collect users' mobile phone numbers, Rajoy's staff also published an online video that showed the PP leader calling supporters on their cell phones asking for help. Both parties also used the internet to target the more than one million Spaniards living abroad with appeals to vote. All these functions demonstrate attempts by the Socialist and Popular campaigns to engage their online supporters by promoting their participation, both online and offline, through words as well as deeds.

Both informative and participatory functions were located within complex websites that, precisely because of the large number of features that they included, needed to ensure easy access and smooth usage. For instance, navigation menus and internal search engines could be found on both the PSOE and PP websites. The Socialist Party also made itself accessible to voters from other countries by providing an English translation of some of its pages. Both parties' websites were frequently updated, at least once a day. The PP website featured some technical flaws, with links returning missing or wrongly located pages, whereas the PSOE did not. The two parties also differed in the frequency with which they communicated with users via email: while the PP did not send any emails to its registered users in the last two weeks before the vote, the PSOE sent one. The features that I have just described indicate the extent to which party websites are well organized and communicate with users

effectively and continuously—in other words, how they deliver their basic online functions.

As these examples from the 2008 Spanish general elections have made clear, we can broadly conceive parties' and candidates' websites as serving three main goals: *information*, which entails the one-way distribution of contents; *participation*, which involves two-way online dialogue as well as the promotion of offline involvement in campaign activities; and *delivery*, which measures how accessible and well organized a website is and how frequently it is updated. All these tools allow political actors and voters to communicate with one another and are thus important for the functioning of political organizations, citizenship, and democracy. On the basis of these three categories, I provide an assessment of how parties and candidates structure their websites both during and between election campaigns and consider how the websites' different characteristics were distributed among the 169 political actors in seven countries that were observed a total 620 times between 2006 and 2010.

Information

The presence of information functions on party and candidate websites was evaluated through twenty-one total variables, nineteen of which were dichotomous and two ordinal. Table 5.1 shows the distribution of the variables across the 620 websites analyzed for this research, which have been weighted according to the algorithm described in chapter 2. The data show a three-tiered distribution of information characteristics. Seven of them (speeches and statements, values and ideology, issue positions/platform/manifesto, external links, video clips, leader biography and profile, and press clippings) were found in at least three-quarters of the party and candidate websites that I analyzed. This set of functions thus constitutes a baseline for content provision on political websites. Indeed, all these variables achieve fundamental informational goals related to communicating leaders' and candidates' biographies, issue positions, and statements. They also perform some customary functions of contemporary websites such as providing links to other sites and offering video contents. Almost all political actors now recognize the need to move beyond the "brochureware" approach that characterized their early efforts (Kamarck 1999) and present a minimum set of core informative elements that users can easily access—the who, what, and why of the party or candidate.

Table 5.1. Distribution of Information Variables ($N = 620$)

Variable	Percentage
Speeches and statements	94.6
Values and ideology	91.6
Issue positions/platform/manifesto	89.9
External links	89.5
Video clips	85.6
Leader biography and profile	80.2
Press clippings	77.1
Campaign/party organizational chart	64.1
Pages for voters in different geographic areas	58.9
Audio clips	53.6
Data and statistics on public policies	46.7
Pages for age groups (youth, etc.)	42.3
Comparisons with opponents' record and platform	35.8
Pages for identity groups (minorities, etc.)	30.6
Endorsements	29.9
Information on electoral law and voting	24.8
Pages for interest groups (business, etc.)	23.2
Podcasts	20.6
Frequently Asked Questions	13.8
Time required to answer an issue question via email	
No answer = 0	72.5
One week or more = 1	3.9
Two to four business days = 2	10.6
One business day = 3	13.0
News updates	
No daily update = 0	21.9
One or two = 1	50.7
Three or four = 2	15.7
Five to seven = 3	8.2
More than seven = 4	3.5

Video, however, has undergone a much greater expansion throughout the years than all other informative functions: whereas in 2006 it could be found in only 65% of the analyzed websites, it grew to 76% in 2007, 93% in 2008, 91% in 2009, and 94% in 2010. Such increase is clearly related to the larger percentages of citizens who access the internet through broadband connections and the increasing popularity of video-sharing platforms, such as YouTube. Both these developments have made online video easy to distribute for political actors, in turn raising citizens' expectations of finding audiovisuals on any

website. From this perspective, digital politics in 2010 looks radically different from 2000, let alone 1990, making the initial predominance of text a distant memory and promoting complex synergies between the written word, the spoken word, and the moving image. While this does not by itself imply that the internet increasingly resembles television, it speaks to the ongoing process of "hybridization" of media channels, genres, and contents (Chadwick 2013).

The second tier of informational functions includes six features that can be found in between two-thirds and one-third of party and candidate websites (campaign or party organizational chart, pages for voters in different geographic areas, audio clips, data and statistics on public policies, pages for voters of different ages, and comparisons with opponents' record and platform). These characteristics are more elaborate or appeal to a narrower set of users than those included in the top tier. Thus, although they are still relatively common, they are less easily found across political websites.

The third tier includes six functions that were present in less than one-third of party and candidate websites (pages for identity groups, endorsements, information on electoral law and voting, pages for interest groups, podcasts, and frequently asked questions). These functions either serve relatively small audiences, require a certain understanding of technology (podcasts), or refer to political communication practices that are specific to particular countries. Endorsements, for instance, are a typical feature of US campaigns and were found in 78% of American candidate websites but only 2% of Italian party websites.

The two nondichotomous variables included in the information index show divergent patterns. On the one hand, parties and candidates publish news updates quickly and frequently on their websites but, on the other hand, they are much less efficient in replying to emails asking for some specific information on their issue positions. More than half of the websites that I analyzed provided one or two news updates each day, and more than one-quarter published three or more, while only one-fifth added fewer than one daily news item. By contrast, almost three-quarters of issue-based emails went unanswered, while only one in eight received a specific response (not counting automated messages acknowledging receipt) within one business day. The evident contrast between political actors' efficiency in unilateral information provision and their lackluster response to requests from the public is striking in and of itself.

Participation

I measured participation features through a total of twenty-one variables, all but one dichotomous (table 5.2). As we did for information, we can group the variables that constitute online participation into three tiers. The top tier includes six variables (campaign contacts, events calendar, solicitation of questions via web or email, email sign-up, downloadable campaign materials, and social networking tool or link to an external social networking platform) that can be found in more than two-thirds of the analyzed websites. They also constitute core and relatively easy to implement engagement functions that a political website that wants to be taken seriously cannot forgo. However, these functions do not necessarily translate into offline endeavors but only build the foundations for them to the extent that they encourage user-to-

Table 5.2. Distribution of Participation Variables ($N = 620$)

Variable	Percentage
Campaign contacts	95.4
Events calendar	78.8
Solicitation of questions via web or email	77.3
Email sign-up	73.5
Downloadable campaign materials	73.3
Social networking tool (or link to Facebook, etc.)	68.1
Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds	65.1
Offline distribution of online-gathered materials	62.4
Online fundraising	58.6
Blog	58.1
"Send this page to a friend"	55.9
Volunteer sign-up	51.2
Online distribution of campaign materials	46.8
Online gadget store	38.4
Discussion forums, chat rooms	35.0
Voter registration, absentee ballot request form	25.1
Event-organizing tool (or link to MeetUp, etc.)	23.8
Online polls	21.2
Possibility to comment on pages	20.2
Media contacting tools	19.7
Time required to answer a volunteer pledge by email	
No answer = 0	66.0
One week or more = 1	4.3
Two to four business days = 2	12.2
One business day = 3	17.5

party and user-to-user dialogue and relationship building. Thus, some websites do invite users in but then do little more to get them involved in a way that can both empower them and augment campaigns' resources and ideas.

Many websites, however, do take this further step, as an analysis of the second tier of participation variables indicates. This group includes nine variables (Really Simple Syndication feeds, offline distribution of online-gathered materials, online fundraising, blog, function to send a page to a friend, volunteer sign-up, online distribution of campaign materials, online gadget store, and discussion forums or chat rooms) that were found in between two-thirds and one-third of party and candidate websites. Most of these functions go beyond online-only, dialogic interaction and involve the mobilization of resources (fundraising, volunteering, decentralized distribution of messages both online and offline) that can turn the internet into an organizational platform and make it a source of tangible campaign assets. Not all parties, however, find these opportunities useful or beneficial enough to take advantage of them. They require some back-end organization, for instance, to channel volunteer requests and assign tasks to online supporters, and users' engagement with them may result in a much-feared loss of message control. Because the lack of physical contact and organizational ties with online supporters makes campaigns worry that their internet evangelists may go astray from the official message and action plan, some political actors forgo these opportunities.

However, the preoccupation with message control has been by and large assuaged in high-profile US online electioneering. US campaigns do not trust their online supporters more than they used to but have learned how to use database technologies in a way that provides nearly instant feedback on user preferences as well as constant direction and monitoring of their efforts. As I explained in chapter 1, computational management has tipped the scale in favor of letting online volunteers loose, under the assumption that campaigns can still keep them under a watchful eye and on a relatively short leash. However, computational management has been less popular among campaigns outside of the United States, mostly due to privacy regulations and concerns. For instance, during the 2012 French presidential campaign, Socialist Party candidate François Hollande created an ambitious internet-based voter contact program modeled on Obama's that aimed at visiting five million households (Issenberg 2012). However, restrictive privacy laws did not allow the fine-tuning of personal voter contacts and volunteer requests that would

have been necessary to replicate the type of individual-level targeting that is commonplace in contemporary American campaigns (R. K. Nielsen 2012). Restrictive personal data protection laws, in turn, reduce the incentives for parties and campaigns to build the permanent technical infrastructure (national voter files and software to manage, employ, and update them) that is necessary to implement computational management (Kreiss and Howard 2010). Because the privacy laws in Continental Europe are more similar to the French than the US model, it is not surprising that American websites feature more participatory functions than those in any other country. The evidence suggests that campaigns outside the United States are still afraid to lose control of their message because they cannot fully employ computational management to thwart this risk. Since this infrastructure is expensive and requires large upfront investments, even in the United States it conceivably could be accessible only to major-party presidential candidates, national party organizations, and a few well-funded candidates down the ticket.

As these examples have shown, political actors are selective in their adoption of web-based engagement tools. For instance, the use of online fundraising and merchandising is highly dependent on which country a party or candidate operates in. Where public financing is close to nonexistent (United States) or constitutes a small part of parties' and candidates' budgets (United Kingdom), leveraging the internet to ratchet up funds is an obvious choice for organizations that aim to be viable and competitive. Thus, among US websites, all featured fundraising tools, and 68% sold campaign merchandise, and, among UK websites, nine in ten accepted online donations and 57% featured a gadget store. By contrast, political actors in Italy and Spain can count on generous public funds and are thus much less likely to ask for private money online: in both countries, only about one-fifth of political websites offered fundraising and merchandising tools. In Germany, Australia, and France the regulatory incentives for political actors to collect individual private donations are smaller than in the United States and the United Kingdom and greater than in Italy and Spain (see Nassmacher 2006). Consistently, political websites in these countries range between these two extremes in terms of online fundraising and merchandising. The former was found in 68% of German, 60% of Australian, and 48% of French websites, while the latter was present in 54% of German, 22% of Australian, and 18% of French websites. Once again, country-specific regulatory arrangements can go a long way in

explaining how political actors structure their digital presence and which applications they prioritize.

The third tier of functions pertaining to the participation index includes five variables (voter registration and absentee ballot request form, event-organizing tool, online polls, possibility to comment on pages, and media contacting tools) that are present in less than one-third of websites (table 5.2). These engagement functions are deemed of lesser importance than the others by most parties and candidates. Once again, this is often due to contextual factors. For instance, voter registration and absentee ballot request forms are common (48% of all websites) in the United States, where the law mandates the former and allows the latter, as well as Spain (44%) and the United Kingdom (34%), where postal voting is widespread and involves a large number of constituents. By contrast, it is very difficult to encounter functions related to voter registration and absentee voting in Italy (2%), where registration is automatic and postal voting is restricted to citizens residing abroad, and Germany (3%), where limitations to postal voting have been relaxed only in 2008. Another example is media contacting tools, which include applications that allow supporters to automatically send complaints or requests to news organizations and editors. While these functions can be found in 43% of American websites, only 9% of the websites in all the remaining countries featured them. Relying on supporters to put pressure on the media is a much more common campaign tactic in the United States than in other Western democracies. In the United States, the Republican Party and its presidential candidates employed these tools more than Democrats did (60% to 50%). Indeed, Republican politicians have for some decades denounced liberal bias in the media as part of their standard rhetorical strategies (Watts et al. 1999), and Republican voters are more likely than Democratic supporters to believe that the news media are biased (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2011). Thus, political actors' choices to employ various types of online tools are affected not only by context but also by the legacy of their past endeavors and enduring campaigning strategies.

Finally, I complemented my assessment of website participation with a variable that measures the time required to answer a volunteer pledge by email. The response rates were slightly higher than for the information request, signaling that parties and candidates are understandably more eager to respond to supporters who offer to help rather than to those who ask for

policy clarifications. However, as many as two-thirds of these emails were still left unanswered, and only one in six received a reply within one business day.[1] The data thus undoubtedly show that most political actors have not come to terms with the need to promptly deal with email feedback and requests. However, this inability may be even more damaging to their online reputation than the lack of certain website functions. Kirsten Foot and Jennifer Stromer-Galley ran various focus groups with voters on these issues and concluded that politicians' failure to respond to email inquiries can cause a breach of trust:

> The norms of interpersonal conversation are violated if a response is not received. The sender of the message feels slighted if after sending the message no response or feedback is given back to the sender. . . . The implication for candidates and their online campaigns is that they risk giving participants a negative impression by not replying to email messages. (Stromer-Galley and Foot 2002)

In chapter 8 we return to the issue of email responsiveness in order to fully assess what factors affect it through a multivariate model.

Delivery

An additional fifteen variables (all but two dichotomous) measure how political websites deliver their functions (table 5.3). As with information and participation, the variables that measure website delivery can be divided into three tiers based on their distribution in the whole corpus. The first one includes five variables (return to home page from all internal pages, pictures and graphics outside the banner, navigation toolbar in all pages, internal search engine, and lack of missing or under construction pages) that can be found in at least two-thirds of websites. These characteristics are indeed fundamental to guarantee a comfortable user experience, and any website that lacks them may quickly alienate its visitors. A second tier of functions that could be found in between two-thirds and one-third of websites includes four items (accessibility with different browsers, privacy policy, moving objects, and site map) that entail more elaborate dimensions of delivery, such as the protection of personal data and the need for the website to be fully accessible regardless of the navigation software employed by the user. Finally, the third tier includes four variables (interactive maps, live-streaming of events, foreign language translations, and cartoons or animations) that were identified

Table 5.3. Distribution of Delivery Variables ($N = 620$)

Variable	Percentage
Return to home page from all internal pages	96.8
Pictures and graphics outside the banner	96.2
Navigation toolbar in all pages	94.8
Internal search engine	68.0
Lack of missing/under-construction pages	66.6
Accessibility with different browsers	60.2
Privacy policy	58.7
Moving objects	42.7
Site map	38.4
Interactive maps	31.7
Live-streaming of events	23.8
Foreign language translations	18.3
Cartoons and animations	15.5
Date when last update appeared	
One month ago = 0	4.2
Two weeks ago = 1	5.3
In the last week = 2	8.9
In the last two days = 3	21.6
Within the last 24 hours = 4	60.0
Average emails sent weekly	
No emails = 0	51.3
Less than one = 1	12.3
One = 2	15.3
Two = 3	10.6
Three or more = 4	10.5

in less than one-third of the analyzed websites. Apart from foreign language translations, such variables correspond to what Gibson and Ward (2000: 303) define as "glitziness," that is, the extent to which a website employs spectacular and tech-savvy features to enhance the presentation of its contents. Results thus show that parties and candidates pay more attention to ensuring usability and ease of navigation than to presenting users with flashy items, which may distract them from the key elements of the website. These findings are consistent with design studies that suggest that a "less is more" approach emphasizing usability and simplicity tends to be more effective than impressing visitors with overly complex graphics (J. Nielsen 1999).

That only 18% of the analyzed websites was found to offer foreign language translations of at least some of their contents seems puzzling in light of popular portrayals of the internet as a borderless global public arena. Online

politics, however, is still nation-centric because offline politics, and especially electoral politics, still is. Thus, parties and candidates offer translations of selected website contents only if context encourages them to do so. In the United States, for instance, four in ten websites offered translations, mostly to cater to the large Spanish-speaking minority residing there; the percentage was even higher (58%) for the websites of the Democratic Party and its candidates, for whom Hispanics are a crucial voting bloc (Leal et al. 2005). Similarly, translations could be found in one-third of political websites in Spain, consistent with the fact that various languages are therein co-official together with Castellan. Germany, which hosts conspicuous Turkish and Eastern European minorities, comes third with one in four websites offering translations. By contrast, no French website offered such a feature, which is a striking indicator of linguistic protectionism by French institutions and politicians. Interesting differences can be found among party families as well. Among left-wing parties such as socialists and greens, which tend to appeal to minority constituencies more than other parties, translations are rather common (30%). By contrast, parties that often advocate anti-immigrant and culturally conservative positions are less likely to offer foreign language translations on their websites—they could be found in 13% of Christian democrat and conservative websites, 5% of radical right parties' sites, and 4% of liberal ones. Unsurprisingly, half of regionalist party websites provided translations, typically in the language of the territory or ethnic group they aim to represent. Once again, adoption of particular online tools often depends on political actors' overarching goals and interests and the contextual incentives they face.

Finally, the two nondichotomous variables that contribute to measuring website delivery show contradictory results. On the one hand, the content on most websites turned out to be quite fresh, as six in ten had been updated within the previous twenty-four hours and another one in five within the previous two days. Parties and candidates thus seem to realize that presenting up-to-date news is crucial to ensuring return visits and loyalty among their users. By contrast, parties and candidates do not send emails to their supporters at a particularly high rate. Although, as reported in table 5.2, almost three-quarters asked visitors to leave their addresses, more than half of all political actors sent no messages during the two-week observation period. Thus, one-third of parties and candidates that requested users to engage by email did not follow through on their promises, which is consistent with the previous

findings that political actors are not particularly at ease when dealing with incoming email. However, parties and candidates that used the web to raise funds turned out to send more emails than those that did not. Among political actors whose websites lacked online fundraising tools, 68% did not send any email, whereas among those who asked for donations on their sites, 60% sent at least one email in the two-week observation period. Although I did not code the contents of these messages, and thus cannot ascertain whether they contained requests for money, the correlation between online fundraising and the number of messages that were sent indicates that parties and candidates who are more eager to raise funds through the internet—such as American ones—are also more likely to use email to keep contact with their supporters.

Putting It All Together

The individual variables are not just interesting by themselves. Combining their values into aggregate indices (according to the procedure explained in chapter 2) allows us to better understand the overall morphology of party and candidate websites.

Combining different variables raises the issues of dimensionality (whether the variables that are compounded do pertain to the same domain) and of the weighting of individual variables (whether each item should affect the combined value equally or not). With respect to dimensionality, chapter 2 has already offered a discussion of the empirical techniques and theoretical reasoning behind my choices. On a related note, as readers may have inferred from the analysis conducted so far, most variables measure the *potential for*, rather than the actual *provision of*, information, participation, and delivery. That is, by simply asking citizens to "have their say" through email, feedback forms, and online polls, political websites do not necessarily fulfill these promises unless politicians and staffers act upon the inputs that citizens might provide through these tools. Similarly, it is one thing to build a website with a logical structure and an accessible format, but quite another to keep it constantly updated. Informing citizens does require providing not just static web pages with standard contents that can be found in any printed campaign material but a constant flow of news updates and swift responses to citizens' requests for clarifications. Thus, variables such as the time required to answer emails requesting issue information or pledging volunteer hours, the number of

news items published every day and of emails sent every week, and the time at which the last update occurred are particularly important. They move beyond assessing the technical opportunities for information, participation, and delivery and offer an estimate of the actual provision of these functions. As a result, they should weigh more on the compound indices measuring these dimensions than the other individual variables. The indices that I present here achieve this goal because, as readers can see from tables 5.1, 5.2, and 5.3, these five variables are not dichotomous, but ordinal, and range between 0 and 3 or 4. As a result, their maximum value can be up to four times higher than that of every other variable, and their implicit weight is thus three or four times greater. This mechanism contributes to balancing the indices so as to put a premium on the actual provision of functions over the sheer technical possibility for it.

These indices of information, participation, and delivery should be treated as empirical approximations. They reduce a multifaceted, complex reality to convenient—and internally coherent—summaries, whose central tendencies provide an overall indicator of parties' and candidates' online priorities and strategies. Political websites perform on average at half the maximum proficiency levels that they could theoretically achieve, as shown by the mean and median values of the indices in Table 5.4. The indices of information and participation were on average slightly lower than half their maximum values, whereas the mean and median delivery indices were slightly higher than that. This finding suggests that party and candidate websites have consolidated a set of functions that ensure a relatively comfortable user experience, and this goal is prioritized over those of informing and engaging supporters.

That being said, the data also show that political actors do not necessarily favor information over participation in designing their online presence. Indeed, the information and participation indices have, on average, substantially equal values (not only by themselves but also relative to their theoretical maximum values). This finding contradicts most empirical research on politi-

Table 5.4. Descriptive Statistics for Website Indices ($N = 620$)

Index	Min-max	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
Information	0–26	12.38	12	3.83
Participation	0–23	11.12	12	4.52
Delivery	0–21	11.56	12	3.42

cal websites, which has so far found that political actors tend to privilege online information at the expense of participation (Gibson et al. 2003; Foot and Schneider 2006; Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2007). As we saw in chapter 3, this attitude is often lamented when discussing the limits of institutional political actors' approach to the internet. By contrast, my findings support the observation made by Lilleker et al. (2011: 208) that "the traditional monologue approach to transmitting data is being balanced out in modern e-campaigns" by an increasing reliance on interactivity. Indeed, two-thirds of the total political actors included in this study (114 out of 169) had higher participation than information indices (relative to their different maximum achievable scores). To be sure, the data do not warrant the unqualified conclusion that parties and candidates have *radically* altered their approach to digital media by embracing the participatory ethos that cyber utopians believed was intrinsic to the medium and inevitable for its users. What the data show, however, is that political actors now tend to adopt *a more balanced approach between information and participation*. They are less mindful of the potential perils of relinquishing some control over their message, possibly because the benefits of an at least tentatively engaging approach to online communication are clearer now that large parts of the population get campaign information through the web, as we will see in part III.

The fact that the mean and median values for all indices are similar to each other and that they are close to half the maximum theoretical score indicates that the data are normally distributed, which is confirmed by the typical bell-shaped curve that is obtained by plotting the values of the three indices (not shown here). A plurality of websites thus achieved scores close to the average and median values in the whole sample. However, there is also ample variation across the 620 websites analyzed for this study. In the information index, for instance, there is a wide difference between the websites of the Australian Labor Party (with an average index of 21.3 across all the observations that involved it), Barack Obama (20.5), and Italian Democrats of the Left (19.3), compared to those of four Italian minor parties and minor French presidential candidate Nicolas Dupont-Aignan, which all achieved scores between 1 and 5. By the same token, we encounter a huge gap if we compare the average participation indices of the websites of Obama (20.4), the French green electoral cartel Europe Ecologie (19), and US Democratic primary candidates Hillary Clinton (18.9) and John Edwards (18.7) with those of three Australian minor party leaders, UK Independence Party leader Lord Pearson

of Rannoch, and three minor Italian parties and electoral cartels, which all failed to achieve scores above 3. Slightly less stunning imbalances, though by no means irrelevant, could be found by contrasting the delivery scores achieved by the Australian Labor Party (averaging 17) with those of the websites of one party (United Australia) and one party leader (Warren Truss of the National Party of Australia) from the same country and, again, four Italian minor parties, whose average indices were all lower than 5. Chapter 6 focuses on the sources of these inequalities, but these examples already indicate that there is wide variation among political websites and that it is thus important to understand what causes it. As the standard deviations in table 5.4 suggest, slightly more variance is apparent in participation than in information and delivery. This result could indeed be expected, given that it is precisely the engagement potential of digital media that parties and candidates have been more hesitant to develop.

Political Websites: A First Appraisal

This first look at the structure of political websites across seven Western democracies has revealed some important features of the supply of digital politics.

First, parties and candidates are *selective* in their online communication choices. Instead of blindly amassing all the characteristics that are theoretically desirable and practically available for purchase, they carefully choose which ones to include and which ones to forgo according to strategic considerations. These findings confirm those of James Druckman, Martin Kifer, and Michael Parkin (2007: 438) in their study of US congressional candidates: "Clearly, being able to include a technology is not enough; candidates must also have political motivations for going beyond the electronic brochure standard." They are also consistent with the layered approach to campaign communication on which this book is based, which postulates that political actors adjust their messaging tools, including digital media, according to their interests, ideas, resources, and communication environment (see chapter 1). Evidence for parties' and candidates' selective approach was found with respect to how much weight they place on broader goals such as informing, engaging, and delivering an effective user experience. Selectivity is also revealed in the specific functions that political actors emphasize within these

domains, as shown by the three-tiered distribution of the information, participation, and delivery characteristics. Acknowledging selectivity by parties and candidates allows one to more fruitfully focus on the conditions under which they adopt certain online tools rather than stopping at the descriptive proposition that most of them underutilize some of the affordances of digital media—they certainly do, as the average index scores have shown, but a more in-depth look shows a more nuanced scenario. Such an approach may also enable us to understand why some political actors in some contexts build outstanding digital presences that clearly deviate from the modal outcome, while others perform at much lower levels than average.

Second, parties and candidates do not prioritize information and top-down dissemination of contents over participation and bottom-up engagement. These overarching goals were much more balanced in the websites that I analyzed than most of the literature claims. Parties' and candidates' approach to online communication may have matured, and some of the concerns that had made political actors reluctant in the adoption stage seem to have eased. These changes may be due to accumulated experience and domestication of technology among party elites and campaign staffers or may result from (real or perceived) user pressure for deeper online involvement. However, the realm in which websites were found to be more complete is that of delivery, which suggests that parties and candidates are still more eager to invest in the look and feel of their online presence rather than in the contents they publish and the activities they promote through it.

Third, a remarkable gap emerged between political actors' communication on their websites and that over email. Most likely because of organizational constraints and limitations, parties and candidates struggle to keep up with users' email requests and to continuously send messages to those citizens who are willing to submit their email addresses. Incidentally, this contrasts with the fact that campaign staffs work hard to obtain these addresses, as demonstrated by online professionals' relentless focus on building and refining increasingly complex contact lists (Howard 2006). Such lists may be more fruitfully employed for other types of communication—such as personalized contacts by volunteers and canvassers—than for email exchanges. They might also be more valuable for political actors that prioritize online fundraising—where email is a convenient channel to ask for money—than for those that do not.

Fourth, and finally, while these observations are valid for political websites in general, a large amount of variation can also be found among them, which suggests that different parties and candidates are likely to employ different digital tools with varying intensity, investment, and commitment. Contextual conditions and incentives can go a long way toward explaining the digital strategies favored by political actors.

CHAPTER SIX

Disparities in Political Websites

Together with liberty, equality is one of the two core principles that democracy strives to achieve and maintain (Sartori 1987). Preoccupations with equality have been a constant thread in discussions about the role of the internet in political communication and democracy (for a review, see Chadwick 2006: 168–173). Sources of online inequalities among political actors can be located at the meso and macro levels of inquiry. At the organizational level, I show that parties' and candidates' online efforts are in part affected by their electoral strength and available resources, with important implications for the balance of party competition. At the structural level, I discuss whether the uneven diffusion of internet connections among the populations of different countries affects the online presence of their political actors—which may impact the breadth of political opportunities that citizens can encounter on the web.

Inequalities at the Party Level: Do the Rich Get Richer?

In January 2008, as the US presidential primaries were in full swing after the Iowa caucuses and New Hampshire primaries and en route to Super Tuesday (when twenty-four states plus American Samoa were set to hold primaries and caucuses), voters had quite different experiences depending on which candidate's website they visited. For instance, a Democratic supporter who went to the official site of the former First Lady (and frontrunner) Hillary Rodham Clinton could find, among many other things, information on how to vote, data and statistics on public policies, and downloadable campaign materials. If, however, the same voter went to the website of former Alaska senator and long-shot Democratic aspirant Mike Gravel, he could not find any of these features. The two candidates' online efforts also differed markedly in their freshness and responsiveness. Three to four news updates were published every day on the website of the former First Lady, as opposed to less than one on Gravel's site. At the peak of the campaign, Clinton was in daily email contact with those who had left their addresses, while Gravel's website did not even ask visitors to subscribe for email updates. Clinton's campaign replied to an email requesting issue information within two business days, while no response was received from Gravel's staff; both campaigns, however, replied to a volunteer pledge by email in just one day. Clinton's website explicitly targeted minorities, the youth, and seniors, as well as offering geographically segmented information, while Gravel's did not. Clinton's web presence was also much more engaging: visitors could register to vote, contact media outlets, distribute materials downloaded from the site both online and offline, and create their own blog linked to the campaign's; none of these functions could be found on Gravel's site. There were also important differences in the functioning of the two websites: visitors to Clinton's could see moving objects within pages, read foreign language translations of most contents, and easily explore the site thanks to a "return to homepage" button and a navigation toolbar; Gravel's website lacked all these features. Interestingly, however, it was Clinton's website that presented missing pages and broken links, not Gravel's.

As a result of all these differences, throughout the coding period, Clinton's website scored higher than Gravel's in all three indices, with a gap of 12 points in information, 8 in participation, and 5 in delivery. Not all minor candidates,

however, failed to keep up with the frontrunner: former governor of New Mexico Bill Richardson, for instance, had a website that rivaled Clinton's scores in all indices but information. This performance was perhaps due to the fact that Blue State Digital, the same company that advised Barack Obama through the 2007–8 cycle, was responsible for Richardson's online presence.

Later in the same year, voters who went online before the Spanish general elections could find stark differences between the website of the governing Socialist Workers Party, which had high scores in all three indices, and that of radical left-wing party Izquierda Unida (United Left), which was distanced from the ruling party by 5, 12, and 7 points in the indices of information, participation, and delivery, respectively. However, not all small parties were doomed to be dwarfed by the Socialists' online presence: for instance, the Catalan regionalist party Convergencia i Uniò (Convergence and Union) had an information index only 2 points lower than that of the PSOE, and its delivery index was even 1 point higher; only the participation index revealed a larger, 5-point gap between the two differently sized parties.

Similar contrasts could be found one year later, during the European Parliament elections in France. For instance, the website of the conservative ruling force Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (Union for a Popular Movement) was much more developed in all dimensions than that of Libertas (Liberty), an electoral cartel of two conservative and Euro-skeptic forces: Mouvement pour la France (Movement for France) and Chasse, Pêche, Nature et Traditions (Hunting, Fishing, Nature and Traditions). The UMP outscored Libertas in all indices, by 5, 6, and 3 points respectively. Yet the big electoral surprise of the year, green cartel Europe Ecologie (Europe Ecology), outperformed the UMP in information by 5 points and was neck and neck with it in both participation and delivery, where its indices were 1 point higher and lower, respectively, than those of the main governing party.

One more year later, in 2010, Australia went to the polls for its federal elections and, once again, voters who ventured on party websites could find a wide range of variation. On the conservative front, for instance, the Liberal Party, which had governed the country until three years earlier and now led the opposition to the Labor government, greatly outscored the socially conservative minor party Family First, whose website was inferior to the Liberals' by 7 points in information, 11 in participation, and 8 in delivery. Yet the Nationals, who are the Liberals' junior coalition partners and have about one-ninth of their votes, presented a website that was very competitive with their senior

partners', as it achieved equal scores in information and delivery, while being inferior by 5 points in participation.

These examples demonstrate that large inequalities exist in parties' and candidates' online efforts, and some of them can be explained by resource imbalances, as the normalization theory discussed in chapter 3 suggests. However, the cases just described also show that at least some minor parties manage to keep up with their more resourceful counterparts.

Digital inequalities thus require a more subtle understanding than has often been the case in the literature on internet politics. A useful starting point is Strandberg's (2008) finding that normalization—that is, a correlation between parties' size and the development of their websites—is more commonly found in countries that employ majoritarian rather than proportional electoral systems. While Strandberg derives this conclusion from a meta-analysis of previous research, the comparative design adopted for this book allows us to test this proposition with firsthand empirical data because it includes countries that use various types of majoritarian systems in their general elections (Australia, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States) as well as countries that use proportional systems (Italy, Germany, and Spain).

In order to test the claims of the normalization theory, I employ two sets of indicators. The first is the percentage of votes that a party or candidate achieved in the preceding election.[1] This measure has been used in many studies on normalization in order to differentiate between large and small, major and minor parties, but it poses two theoretical problems. First, the independent variable (votes) was measured after the dependent variable (as website analyses were conducted before election day). Second, and as a result, it implicitly rules out the possibility that online campaigning may affect election outcomes. This assumption contradicts the findings of some recent studies (e.g., Gibson and McAllister 2006, 2011; Sudulich and Wall 2010) that have claimed that candidates' web presence has a small but significant positive effect on the votes they obtained. In order to address these issues, I employ a second indicator that measures the financial resources that each party or candidate had at its disposal in the year in which the analysis was conducted.[2] Originally, these figures were expressed in different currencies (Australian and US dollars, UK sterling, and euros) and corresponded to different purchasing values both between currencies and through time. To control for these variations, I converted original monetary values into US dollars at equal

purchasing values through purchasing power parities (PPP) calculated by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2012). Financial capital is an important component of political actors' resources, although ideally organizational assets such as paid and unpaid staff and available skills should also be included. However, because these assets are even harder to quantify both within and across parties, let alone countries, they have not been taken into consideration here.

In order to estimate the impact of offline inequalities on the web presence of political actors, table 6.1 shows measures of the bivariate correlations between parties' and candidates' resources and votes and their websites' indices of information, participation, and delivery. In general, as can be seen from the bottom row, percentages of both votes and resources are strongly correlated with all three indices of websites characteristics. The relationship between votes and website features is slightly stronger than that involving resources. The correlations involving information tend to be weaker than those pertaining to participation and delivery, which suggests that the least resourceful parties and candidates have less trouble supplying content than promoting engagement and guaranteeing a pleasant user experience. This outcome is understandable given that information to be posted online is usually already available because it has been prepared for other communication channels

Table 6.1. Pearson's Correlation Coefficients between Political Actors' Votes and Resources and Their Website Indices

	Votes				Resources			
	Info	Part	Del	*N*	Info	Part	Del	*N*
Australia	.638***	.355**	.676***	55	.579***	.338*	.599***	60
France	.225*	.557***	.454***	80	.222	.411***	.392***	77
Germany	.454**	.311*	.343*	41	.235	.242	.059	38
Italy	.391***	.422***	.377***	82	.425***	.407***	.391***	70
Spain	.182	.435***	.298*	68	.188	.398***	.278*	68
UK	.642***	.385**	.702***	63	.554***	.316*	.713***	63
USA	.609***	.445***	.536***	78	.647***	.480***	.576***	85
All	.442***	.451***	.483***	469	.382***	.424***	.421***	462

Note: In nonelectoral periods, percentages of votes achieved in the previous general election were considered.

*$p \leq .05$

**$p \leq .01$

***$p \leq .001$

(e.g., leaflets, press releases, official statements, and public reports). By contrast, participation demands database infrastructures and active management by staffers; frequent updates and maintenance require reliable manpower; and glitzy website features can be costly to build. These findings thus suggest that the normalization theory generates empirically accurate predictions in most cases and that strong inequalities exist between the online presence of larger and smaller parties and wealthier and poorer parties.

That being said, however, the comparative design of this research also reveals interesting differences between political systems. For instance, let us focus on the correlation between resources and the delivery index, which is reported in the second to last column in table 6.1. The coefficient ranges between 1 (perfect direct association) to –1 (perfect inverse association), with 0 indicating no association. As shown in the table, the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States all show strong and significant coefficients, well above .5; in France and Italy, the correlation is still significant, but lower, just below .4; in Spain, the correlation is even weaker but once again significant; in Germany, though, it is almost nonexistent (.059) and not significant. Similar differences can be found by comparing countries using other correlations presented in the table. Thus, while normalization is a valid theoretical framework to explain inequalities in parties' and candidates' online efforts in Western democracies, a closer look at the empirical evidence also reveals that such inequalities vary depending on political context. This calls for a refinement of the normalization theory.

How can this pattern be explained? As suggested by Strandberg (2008), the electoral systems adopted in different countries, and in particular the use of majoritarian systems, is a promising starting point. The strongest correlations are found in the United Kingdom and the United States, which both employ first-past-the-post plurality systems, generally conducive to two-party systems (Duverger 1954), and Australia, which employs alternative voting, a system in which voters rank candidates in order of preference in single-member districts, which strongly benefits the major parties (Farrell and McAllister 2005). Correlations are almost always significant, but weaker, in France, whose majority double-ballot system has a less drastic reduction effect on the party system than first-past-the-post, allowing multiple parties to gain seats and be relevant in government formation (Elgie 2005). Similarly mild associations are found in Italy, whose proportional system with a majority bonus, while allowing various parties to gain seats, also introduces some incentives toward

larger aggregations and penalties for small parties that run outside the main coalitions (Pasquino 2007). Spain, whose proportional electoral system disproportionally benefits the two main parties, but allows multiparty competition and facilitates the representation of regional parties (Hopkin 2005), shows slightly weaker correlations than Italy. Finally, Germany, with its mixed-member proportional system coupled with a 5% threshold (Saalfeld 2005), shows the weakest correlations overall.

Thus, political actors' online efforts are more strongly affected by their electoral strength and resources in countries that employ majoritarian rather than proportional electoral systems. The causal mechanism behind this association may have to do with the fact that electoral systems define how likely it is for parties to win seats given their electoral support and thus create different incentives for smaller parties to aggressively compete in the campaign. The greater their chances to gain at least a few seats, which may translate into influence in government formation and policy-making clout, the stronger their campaigning efforts, both online and offline, can be expected to be. It should be noted that this explanation does not differentiate between the web and other communication channels, as the causal mechanism that I am suggesting should affect all facets of parties' and candidates' campaigning—possibly to a different degree depending on their relative costs. Consistently with the layered approach to political communication highlighted in chapter 1, digital campaigning tools do not simply "diffuse" uniformly across countries and parties. Rather, they are adopted depending on each political actor's ideas, interests, organizational preferences, and, most relevant in this context, electoral environments.

In evaluating the relationship between resource inequalities and online political communication, one issue that deserves attention is whether digital media can help less resourceful parties and candidates reduce the baseline financial imbalances that separate them from their major rivals. Theoretically, poorer parties may be able to close the gap with richer ones by cultivating a dedicated following online and by building effective tools to channel this enthusiasm into web-based donations. Such may have been the case, for instance, for long-shot 2008 Republican presidential primary candidate Ron Paul. A Republican Texas congressman who had run for president on the Libertarian Party ticket in 1988, Paul benefited from a vibrant internet movement that helped him collect more than $34 million, much of it raised through money bombs (tactical agreements among supporters to concentrate donations

on a specific day in order to achieve an impressive aggregate result that would help garner media publicity and fuel greater enthusiasm). These resources enabled Paul to continue campaigning even after the nomination had been practically decided. They also allowed him to stay relevant in conservative politics, to the point that his son Rand was elected senator for Kentucky in 2010 and Ron Paul himself ran again, with a more high-profile role, in the 2012 Republican presidential primaries.

The data at my disposal do not allow to fully test the hypothesis that an effective online presence, particularly among less resourced parties and candidates, can boost fundraising and thus may contribute to equalizing financial resources between major and minor players. However, one aspect that we can consider is whether poorer parties at least *try* harder to garner resources through their websites than richer parties do. After all, as any fundraising consultant and party treasurer knows, the most important thing to do to raise money is to *ask* for it (Steen 1999). We can thus test whether poorer political actors tend to create fundraising opportunities on their websites to a greater degree than the richer organizations that, theoretically, are less in need for money. This question can be answered by comparing the amount of resources (in millions of PPP US dollars) enjoyed by parties and candidates that feature two crucial donation-gathering functions—online fundraising and merchandising tools—on their websites with those that do not. On average, political actors that fundraise online have almost three times as many more resources than those that do not (34.6 million vs. 13.2), and the gap is even wider with respect to web-based merchandising (46.6 vs. 10.8). Thus, a straightforward answer to the question is that, far from jumping on the opportunity to raise money online, poorer political actors are lagging behind and, instead, richer parties and candidates are pursuing the opportunity to get richer through the web in a more decisive fashion. The data also confirm that patterns of inequality in parties' online efforts tend to be stronger in majoritarian than in proportional electoral systems. In the former, parties that used their websites to raise funds were nine times richer than those that did not do so (25.0 vs. 2.8 millions of PPP US dollars), while in the latter the gap was comparatively smaller (47.7 vs. 16.8). In other words, less resourceful parties in proportional systems are less timid—in both absolute and relative terms—in their online fundraising endeavors than they are in majoritarian systems. With respect to online merchandising, the relative differences are almost the same between majoritarian and proportional systems, with political actors that rely upon it

being about four times richer than those that forgo it (35.4 vs. 8.5 millions of PPP US dollars in majoritarian, 56.5 vs. 12.9 in proportional systems).

Once again, the internet proves to be no antidote per se to political inequalities between more and less resourceful electoral organizations—in the sense that the rich are doing more to *stay* richer than the poor to *get* richer. However, electoral systems provide different incentives for minor parties to fundraise online. Minor political actors in proportional systems attempt more decisively to close the income gap with major contenders through web-based financial requests than is the case in majoritarian contests.

Unequal Technological Development and Political Actors' Online Presence

Parties and candidates operating in political systems where only a minority of citizens have access to the internet may have weaker incentives to invest in their online presence than those that campaign in contexts where most voters can, at least theoretically, access their online ventures (see chapter 3). As a result, uneven technological development in different countries may be conducive to cross-country inequalities in the supply side of digital politics. In order to test this hypothesis, table 6.2 shows the percentage of internet users for each country in the midway year of the analysis (2008) and their average website index scores across all observations.[3]

Let us start by comparing the countries with the highest and lowest percentage of internet connections—the United Kingdom and Italy. Political

Table 6.2. Technological Development and Average Website Index Scores by Country

Country	Percentage of Internet Users (2008)	Average Website Indices		
		Information	Participation	Delivery
UK	78.4	13.1	12.2	11.6
Germany	77.9	11.8	11.3	12.5
US	74.0	12.3	14.6	12.2
Australia	71.7	12.3	9.0	10.2
France	70.7	12.0	10.8	12.0
Spain	59.6	14.2	11.2	12.4
Italy	44.5	10.9	9.2	10.1

websites in the former consistently outscore those in the latter, with a gap of 2 average points in information, 3 in participation, and 1.5 in delivery (all of these differences are significant at $p \leq .05$, two-tailed t-test). Spain, however, despite being second to last in terms of online access among the population, features the websites with the highest indices of information and the second highest indices of delivery. Yet again, although Australia has a percentage of internet connections similar to France and higher than Spain, its political websites do not measure up in terms of participation, with statistically significant negative differences in all but one of the comparisons between indices ($p \leq .05$, two-tailed t-test for all pairwise comparisons; only the difference in information between Australian and French political actors is not significant). Finally, although fewer Americans are online than Germans and Britons, US websites feature a breadth of participatory affordances that is unparalleled among all remaining countries and is superior in both substantive and statistical terms ($p \leq .05$, two-tailed t-test). This greater amount of engagement functions sets political websites in the United States apart from those in all other Western democracies covered in this research and highlights one of the many respects in which the United States should be treated as an extreme rather than a normal case. The weak relationship between technological diffusion and website features is confirmed by the rather low country-level correlations between internet access and the average website indices in each year for which we have data: .264 for information, .448 for participation, and .343 for delivery.[4]

These findings suggest that technological development per se may not be a sufficient condition for the development of parties' and candidates' online efforts and that other systemic factors play a more important role. For instance, the candidate-centered nature and demanding financial requirements of American campaigns encourage political actors to harness the internet in order to create loose networks of volunteers and to enlist and continuously solicit small-dollar contributors (Anstead and Chadwick 2009). These incentives explain why US websites feature a much larger amount and breadth of engagement opportunities than those in other countries. By contrast, compulsory voting in Australia makes electoral mobilization strategically irrelevant for political actors because it is the law, rather than parties and candidates, that mobilizes citizens to turn out (McAllister 2002). This contextual condition contributes to explaining why Australian websites rank lowest in terms of participation, making them a mirror image of American ones de-

spite almost identical levels of internet access. Similarly, the particularly high levels of voter volatility that are usually observed in Spain, a relatively young democracy with weak party-voter linkages (Gunther, Montero, and Botella 2004), may help explain why Spanish websites were on average the most informative in the sample—in a fluid electoral environment, providing arguments to persuade erratic voters is a vital necessity for political actors.[5]

The data thus suggest that inequalities in digital politics are more related to meso-level resource disparities between different parties and candidates than to macro-level uneven technological development across countries. Whereas internet access among the population did not emerge as a strong causal driver of the characteristics of political websites in different countries, explanations rooted in context and institutions appear more convincing.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Party Characteristics and Their Online Presence

If digital inequalities are tied more strongly to differences between parties (in terms of size and resources) than between countries (in terms of diffusion of internet access among the population), what role is played by three other party-level characteristics—highlighted in chapter 3—such as incumbency, ideology, and organization?

Is Incumbency a Drag on Internet Campaigning?

Various scholars have suggested that out-of-power parties and candidates may be expected to be more innovative than incumbents in their communications and thus more eager to adopt digital media. The most refined and nuanced version of this thesis has been offered by David Karpf (2012, chap. 6), who calls this explanation "outparty innovation incentives." This theory is the result of research on digital media and politics in the United States focusing on advocacy groups, blogs, and political associations, among which Karpf finds that those which are excluded from power become more open to change. For instance, the internet-fueled liberal advocacy group MoveOn.org has rev-

olutionized membership recruitment, fundraising, and organization among interest groups and the DailyKos blog has established itself as a progressive opinion maker and aggregator by building an online community whose vibrant engagement is unrivaled in the United States. These organizations were established when Democrats were out of power, and it was precisely this condition that helped them push the envelope on innovation further than similar groups across the aisle. Republicans tried to emulate these digital efforts but failed spectacularly, in no small part because their incumbency status (at the time) provided poor incentives for the stark departure from established arrangements that was required for these endeavors to be successful.

In a similar vein, the websites of Democratic candidates were often richer in contents and more engaging than those of Republican candidates throughout the US 2008 presidential campaign cycle, as Republican George W. Bush was sitting in the Oval Office. An analysis of candidate websites during the primaries revealed stark differences between Democrats' and Republicans' online presence with respect to both information and participation (Vaccari 2013a). The data collected for the present research confirm this pattern for both the primary and the general elections. Throughout eleven observations in 2008, Obama's website averaged 5.5 points more than McCain's in the information index and 4 in the participation index, while McCain's website had a small but statistically nonsignificant edge (.7) in delivery. The gap between the two contenders' websites was larger at the beginning than at the end of the race, as the Republican candidate's staff strove to emulate Obama's innovations. Still, in November, as voters flocked to polling stations, Obama's website continued featuring various functions that McCain's lacked, and his staff was more responsive to email inquiries than his opponent's.

The contrast between US incumbents and challengers, however, is less stark if one looks at party websites: on average, the Republican National Committee actually edged its Democratic counterpart, although the margins are very small for information (.5) and participation (1.5), but substantial for delivery (3). This result is particularly surprising if one considers that the Democratic National Committee was then chaired by Howard Dean, whose 2004 primary campaign had pioneered blogs and online fundraising (Hindman 2005) and who had placed online engagement at the center of his agenda as chairman. Yet Americans vote for candidates, not parties, so the differences between Obama's and McCain's online presence should be taken into greater consideration than those between their respective parties'.

If one seeks evidence for the outparty innovation incentives proposition, the 2007 Australian general elections provide the clearest supporting argument. The website of the incumbent Liberal Party was dwarfed by that of the challenger, the Australian Labor Party, in information (with a 4-point gap), participation (5.5), and delivery (4). The differences between the online efforts of their two leaders, Prime Minister John Howard and Labor standard-bearer Kevin Rudd, were very hard to miss. Rudd had made the internet a cornerstone of his campaign, presenting a website that rivaled that of his own party in terms of contents and engagement opportunities. By contrast, Howard offered only a skeletal website that mostly featured his activity as member of Parliament rather than prime minister and achieved remarkably lower indices than his rival: 9 fewer points in information, 11 in participation, and 2 in delivery.

However, when Australians went to the polls again in 2010, the tide favoring Labor over Liberals had weakened but not turned. The gap had closed in participation and delivery (where the Labor and Liberal party websites prevailed by 1 point, respectively), but the website of the Australian Labor Party still outperformed that of the Liberal Party in information (by 5 points). Liberal leader Tony Abbott's personal website achieved higher scores than Howard's three years earlier but not as high as Rudd's in the previous elections. On the other hand, the new Labor leader Julia Gillard did not have a personal website, as she preferred to communicate through government's official websites and her personal profiles on social media. With Liberals now in opposition and Labor in government, the internet gap between the two main Australian parties was closing, but the reversal predicted by the outparty innovation incentives theory had not fully occurred.

Perhaps it takes longer than three years and more than just one defeat for a party or candidate to shift gears and fully embrace digital media in the face of electoral misfortunes. No country included in my research should provide a better test of this argument than the United Kingdom, where the 2010 general elections ended a thirteen-year stint in government for the Labour Party. After three bitter defeats at the polls and four leadership changes, the Conservative Party did not lack the motivations to try any new medium and tactic that could move it one inch closer to winning the elections and returning to government. The data, however, do not show a convincing superiority of the challengers' website over the incumbents' in the election that finally returned Conservatives to power. The Labour Party website actually outper-

formed the Conservative Party's, although by very thin margins (a 2-point gap in the participation index being the largest). The leaders of the two main parties did not have personal websites in 2010, as Conservative leader David Cameron had opened his video-blog in 2006 (Coleman and Moss 2008) but had subsequently integrated its functions within his party's website. The point here is that the outparty innovation incentives theory predicts that Conservatives should have been much more innovative online than Labour, but the evidence says that no clear difference could be found, at least with the variables and indices employed in this research. This result is due not so much to the challenger party's failure to employ digital media but to the incumbent's sustained efforts to keep up with the competition. Conservatives' website indices in 2010 were quite high (with averages of 17 in information, 16.5 in participation, and 17.5 in delivery), but Labour's online efforts were of matching strength.[1]

The three English-speaking countries included in this research thus provide scant support to the theory that challenger parties should systematically fare better online than incumbents, at least if we consider the two major parties. Figure 7.1 allows us to address this issue more systematically by comparing the website index scores of the two largest parties and candidates in six countries during each general election. (Germany is excluded from this comparison because its two main parties were partners in a large governing coalition from 2004 until the 2009 vote.) As can be seen from the chart, adding France, Italy, and Spain to the comparison by no means strengthens the case for a challenger advantage in online campaigning. The French data show a relationship in the same direction as the theory predicts but of a magnitude too small to constitute a proof. The challenger party's (Parti Socialiste) website slightly outperformed the incumbent's (Union pour un Mouvement Populaire), but their 2007 presidential candidates' online efforts achieved almost identical scores. Italy displays a pattern similar to Australia's: the main challenger party's (Democratici di Sinistra) website obtained higher scores than the main incumbent's (Forza Italia) in 2006, but after winning the elections, the center-left maintained—actually increased—its online edge in 2008, with Partito Democratico (born after the merger between Democratici di Sinistra and the moderate party La Margherita) dwarfing the online efforts of Il Popolo della Libertà (founded on the ashes of Forza Italia and the right-wing party Alleanza Nazionale). Finally, the 2008 Spanish elections once again fail to show superior online efforts by the challengers, as relatively large gaps were

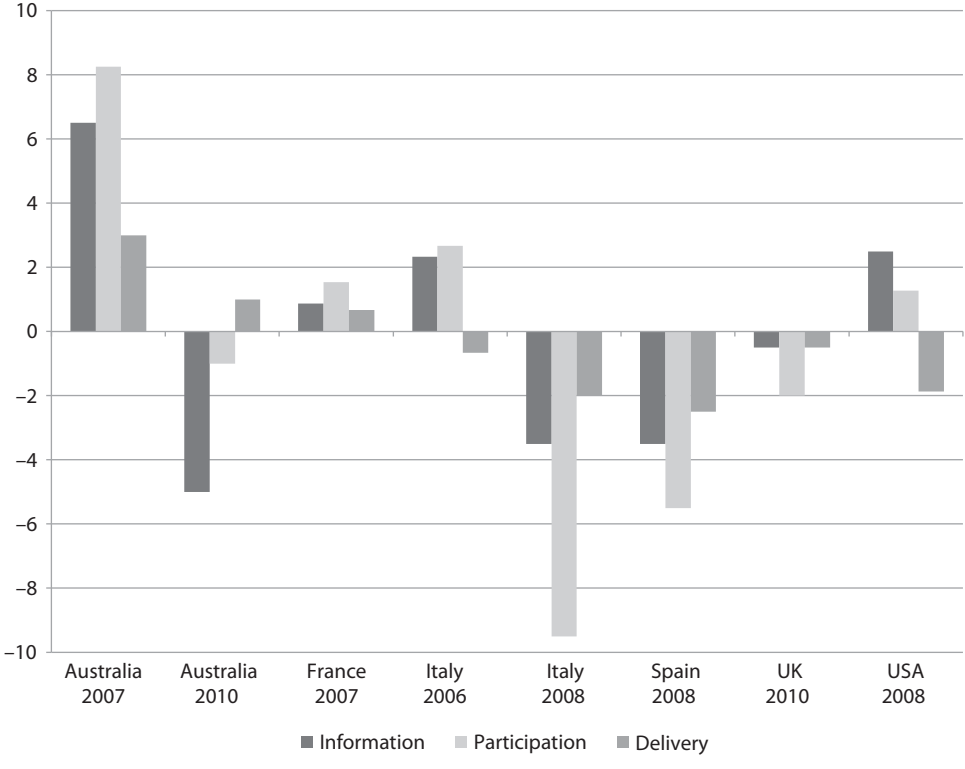

Figure 7.1. Differences between website index scores of the main party challengers and incumbents and their respective candidates in general elections. *Note*: Parties and candidates included in the comparison are (challengers first): Australian Labor Party, Kevin Rudd, Liberal Party, John Howard (Australia 2007); Liberal Party, Australian Labor Party (Australia 2010); Parti Socialiste, Ségolène Royal, Union pour un Mouvement Populaire, Nicolas Sarkozy (France 2007; Democratici di Sinistra, Forza Italia (Italy 2006); Popolo della Libertà, Partito Democratico (Italy 2008); Partido Popular, Mariano Rajoy, Partido Socialista Obrero Esapanol, José Luis Rodriguez Zapatero (Spain 2008); Conservatives, Labour Party (United Kingdom 2010); Democratic National Committee, Barack Obama, Republican National Committee, John McCain (United States 2008). Germany was not included because the two main parties (CDU and SPD) were governing together in a grand coalition in the run-up to the 2009 general elections.

found favoring the incumbent Partido Socialista Obrero Espanol and its prime minister José Luis Rodriguez Zapatero over challengers Partido Popular and its leader Mariano Rajoy.

If we look beyond the two main parties and candidates that compete for votes in each country, incumbency, defined as being part of the national gov-

erning coalition (for candidates, being member of a party belonging to such coalition), shows a *positive*, not negative association with all three indices of website characteristics. Once again, this finding contradicts what we would expect if challengers were more likely than incumbents to invest in digital media. On average, across the whole sample, incumbents outperformed challengers by about 2 points in the information index and 1 point in participation and delivery. All these differences are statistically significant ($p \leq .05$, two-tailed t-test).

Thus, the empirical evidence provides little support for the theory of "outparty innovation incentives" (Karpf 2012). It should be noted, however, that the theory has a much broader scope than can be probed with the data that I have shown here. First of all, Karpf claims that the incentives may affect individual candidates directly, but they transfer to parties only to the extent that electoral defeats affect their internal distribution of power. As I noted in chapter 3, this causal mechanism may apply more strongly in majoritarian types of democracy, where the winner-take-all nature of the competition makes electoral defeats more consequential for political elites, and in candidate-centered political systems, where campaigns are conducted by more flexible, less inertial organizations solely focused on winning votes. To the extent that the United States is the only country included in this research that is both a majoritarian and a candidate-centered system, the data show that the theory applies better there than elsewhere.

Second, some findings suggest that other types of innovation incentives may exist besides having lost an election and being in opposition. For instance, Italian center-left parties may have been more eager to invest in online communication than the center-right simply because center-right leader Silvio Berlusconi was a dominant force on television. As a result, whereas Italian conservatives could afford to neglect digital media, the web constituted one of the few media environments where progressives could carve a tangible competitive advantage (Vaccari 2009), as the data show they attempted to do. Thus, Karpf's insight that some parties have greater contextual incentives than others to adopt digital tools can be usefully broadened to include factors other than defeats at the ballot box.

Third, Karpf argues that outparty innovation incentives explain only part of the imbalance between the progressive and conservative online infrastructures in the United States. Another explanation involves ideological congruence, as current US progressives may embrace grass-roots and bottom-up

politicking more enthusiastically than contemporary American conservatives do. (To reiterate, this argument is about contemporary breeds of US progressives and conservatives, not about progressivism and conservatism per se.) This argument is also advocated by Matthew Kerbel (2009), who claims that progressives have adapted to digital media better than conservatives because they are more at ease with bottom-up communication. Yet another possible causal mechanism is fear among conservatives that their internet efforts can easily be sabotaged by progressive online groups that are numerically superior and better coordinated. As a result, conservatives restrict users' activities on their web-based engagement environments (e.g., by having user-generated contents validated by staff before they are posted), but these arrangements foster less vibrant communities and, in turn, less effective organizations (Karpf 2012).

Finally, the data collected for this research allow a test of only a partial version of the outparty innovation incentives theory, as my research is limited to website characteristics in a five-year time span that at best includes two general elections for each country. By contrast, Karpf focuses on a broader notion of "online infrastructure" that goes beyond institutional party and candidate websites and includes online efforts on various types of platforms by advocacy groups, social movements, consultancy firms, and organized citizens. Karpf's theory aims to capture longer developments whose time frame is closer to a decade than one or two electoral cycles. Thus, a thorough evaluation of the merits of the outparty innovation incentives theory is a broader enterprise to which this research can provide only a partial contribution. Yet the data also offer some suggestions as to how the theory can be better specified in order to account for contextual conditions that may affect digital political competition outside the United States.

Ideology and Online Presence: Advantage, Left?

Looking back to the findings discussed in the previous paragraph, readers may have noticed that, if a trend seems to emerge from the data, it is related to the left-right divide more than incumbency. As can be inferred from figure 7.1, among the two major parties and candidates competing in general elections, progressive websites tended to achieve higher scores than conservative ones irrespective of whether they were in government or not. Building on

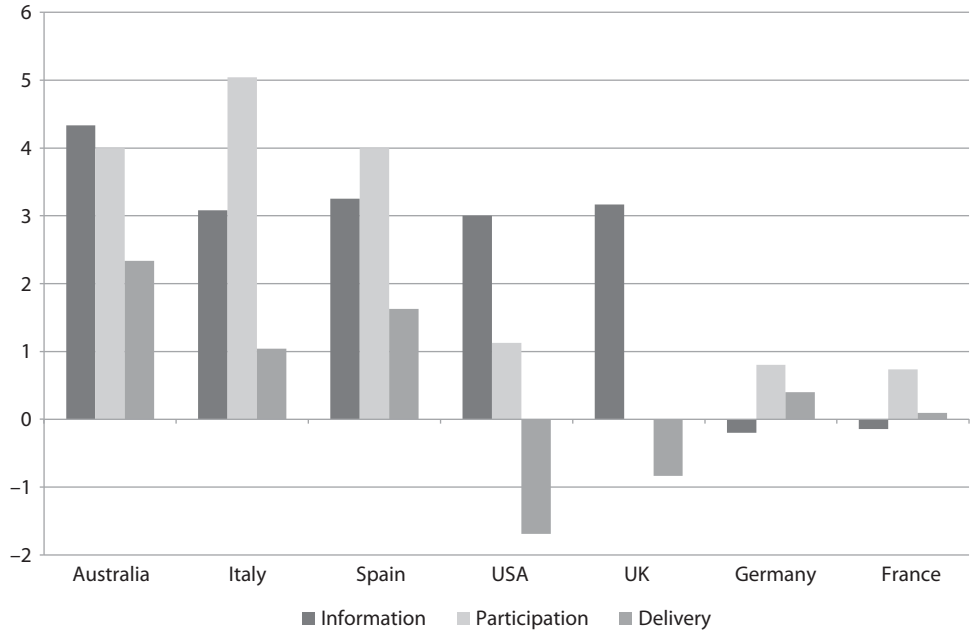

Figure 7.2. Differences in average index scores of the main progressive and conservative parties and candidates or leaders by country. *Note*: Parties and candidates included in the comparison are (progressives first): Australian Labor Party, Liberal Party (Australia); Parti Socialiste, Ségolène Royal, Union pour un Mouvement Populaire, Nicolas Sarkozy (France); Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands, Angela Merkel (Germany); Democratici di Sinistra, Partito Democratico, Forza Italia, Popolo della Libertà (Italy); Partido Socialista Obrero Espanol, José Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, Partido Popular, Mariano Rajoy (Spain); Labour Party, Conservatives (United Kingdom); Democratic National Committee, Barack Obama, Republican National Committee, John McCain (United States).

this, still partial, pattern, I will now more thoroughly scrutinize the relationship between ideology and political actors' online presence.

First, let us look at the two main parties and their candidates and leaders in each country throughout all the website observations that were conducted (which, it should be remembered, include both electoral and nonelectoral periods). Figure 7.2 shows the average indices for all these political actors. In Australia, Italy, and Spain, progressive parties and candidates clearly provide more features related to information and participation than their conservative

counterparts, while the gap in delivery is less pronounced. In the United Kingdom and United States, there is a clear difference favoring left-wing parties in the information index, while there is no systematic pattern for participation, and conservatives narrowly prevail in delivery. In Germany and France, differences between the two main party families are almost undetectable, with the left achieving slightly higher values in participation. A simple method to assess the impact of party ideology in each country is to focus on differences between the average indices of left-wing and right-wing parties and candidates that are greater than 1 (which means that on average one group of websites has at least one feature more than the other). By this criterion, progressive websites offer more informative functions than conservative ones in five out of seven countries; in four out of seven countries, there is a gap in participation in the same direction; and no clear pattern emerges in delivery, with center-left parties and candidates prevailing in three countries, center-right ones edging out in the United States, and no substantial differences in the United Kingdom, Germany, and France. These data suggest that, if one side built superior websites between 2006 and 2010 in the countries included in this study, particularly in terms of information and participation, it is more likely to be the left than the right.

Let us now focus more broadly on all the political actors included in the website analysis, so that we can also include parties smaller than the two main contenders. In order to understand the relationship between parties' and candidates' ideology and the characteristics of their online presence, I classified the political organizations whose websites I analyzed on the basis of the taxonomy of party ideologies suggested by Vassallo and Wilcox (2006), to which I added the category of regionalist parties. Figure 7.3 shows the average values of the indices of information, participation, and delivery by party ideological family.

The data show that political actors of different ideological families approach digital media in distinct ways. In particular, socialist parties and candidates (including US Democrats)[2] outperformed all other political organizations with respect to all three indices. If we look at the differences between socialists and their main counterparts, conservatives (including Australian Liberals and US Republicans), they are substantial and statistically significant ($p \leq .05$, two-tailed t-test) in information (3 points), participation (4 points), and delivery (1.5 points). If we consider the differences between socialist and conservative parties on a country-by-country basis, the former achieve higher

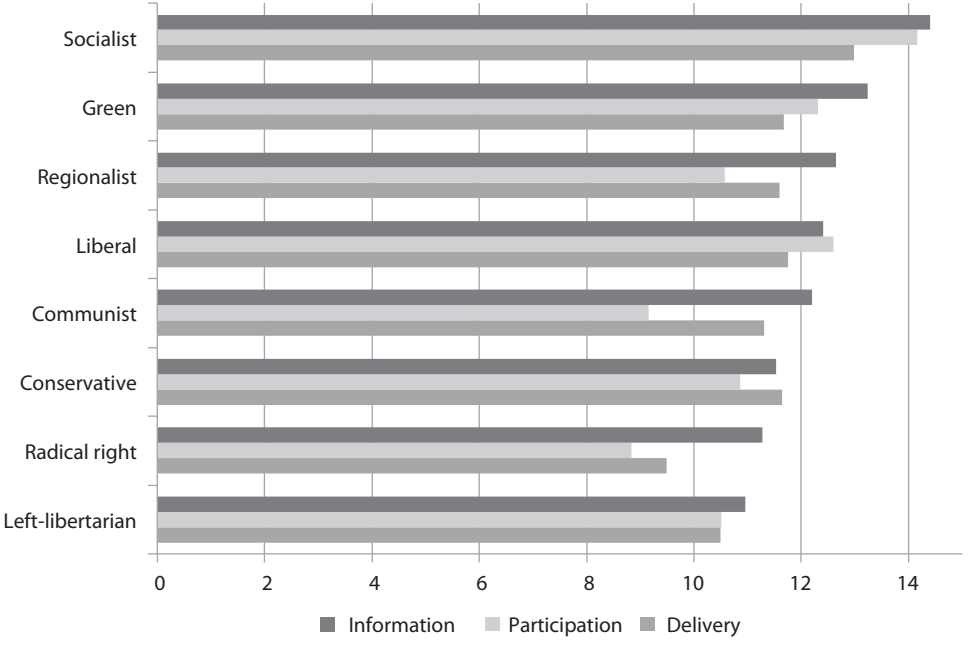

Figure 7.3. Average website index scores by party ideological family. *Note:* Differences across countries and party families are significant for all three indices at $p = .000$ based on ANOVA F scores.

average index scores in all countries but Germany, with statistically significant differences in at least one index in all countries but Germany and Italy. Socialist parties' and candidates' average indices are also significantly higher than those among the rest of the sample.

Green parties also outperform the rest of the sample, with a statistically significant difference in the participation index ($p \leq .05$, two-tailed t-test). On the right, only liberal parties offer a higher than average number of engagement functions on their websites, although the difference with the rest of the sample does not cross the threshold of statistical significance ($p = .051$, two-tailed t-test). Conservative parties' and candidates' websites are on average less likely than the rest of the sample to invest in information tools (where the negative difference is also statistically significant, $p \leq .05$, two-tailed t-test) and not more likely to offer opportunities to participate and functions related to delivery. Another interesting finding from this comparison is that the websites of extremist parties, on both left (communist) and right (radical

right) fronts, turn out to offer fewer functions than average in all three dimensions. At least with respect to institutional websites, it is thus not true that fringe parties, particularly those on the right, may be more at ease online than in the mass media, a claim that is frequently made by scholars and analysts (see chapter 3).

The superiority of the websites of socialist and green parties compared to conservatives—and, to a lesser degree, liberals—suggests that the question mark in the title of this paragraph may be, albeit cautiously and provisionally, removed. There seems indeed to be an online advantage for left-wing parties and candidates compared to their right-wing counterparts, at least with respect to the amount of functions that could be found on their websites between 2006 and 2010. In particular, progressive parties and candidates tend to offer a greater number of engagement opportunities and informative contents.

The correlation between party ideology and website characteristics, however, may be spurious. As was discussed in chapter 3, European social-democratic parties have been historically associated with the mass-party model, heavily focused on recruiting a vast membership and enabling effective participation among them. Parties that have inherited this legacy may thus be expected to rely on the internet mostly to enable debate among their members, to mobilize them when needed, and to guarantee effective dissemination of information to local branches (Löfgren and Smith 2003: 45–46). Following this logic, socialist parties may be more likely to invest in digital media, particularly with respect to engagement features, because their organizational culture prioritizes the involvement of their members and sympathizers in internal decision making or in political activities on the ground. By the same token, green and left-libertarian parties are based on grass-roots organizational paradigms that value informal relationships among members and identifiers over formal ties and structures (Löfgren and Smith 2003: 49). These types of parties may be particularly at ease with the decentralizing affordances offered by the internet, especially the ability to maintain intermittent loose networks of supporters.

To the extent that political actors' organizational cultures and legacies emphasize supporter engagement—either in formal structures or in weak-tie sparse networks—we may expect their websites to offer more opportunities to participate and, possibly, more information on the issues at stake and the in-

ternal affairs of the organization. To test this hypothesis, I classified all parties and candidates included in the analysis on the basis of the criteria that they (or, in the case of candidates and leaders, their parties) employ to select their leaders and parliamentary candidates using the categories suggested by Kenneth Janda.[3] Although understanding party organization requires assessing a much broader set of characteristics (many of which are not easily measured), candidate selection procedures are crucial to a party's internal functioning. As Elmer Schattschneider (1942: 64, quoted in Rahat and Hazan 2010: 8) emphasized more than half a century ago, "The nature of the nominating process determines the nature of the party; he who can make the nominations is the owner of the party. This is therefore one of the best points at which to observe the distribution of power within the party."

In order to understand the relationship between party organization and online communication, figure 7.4 shows the average website indices for political

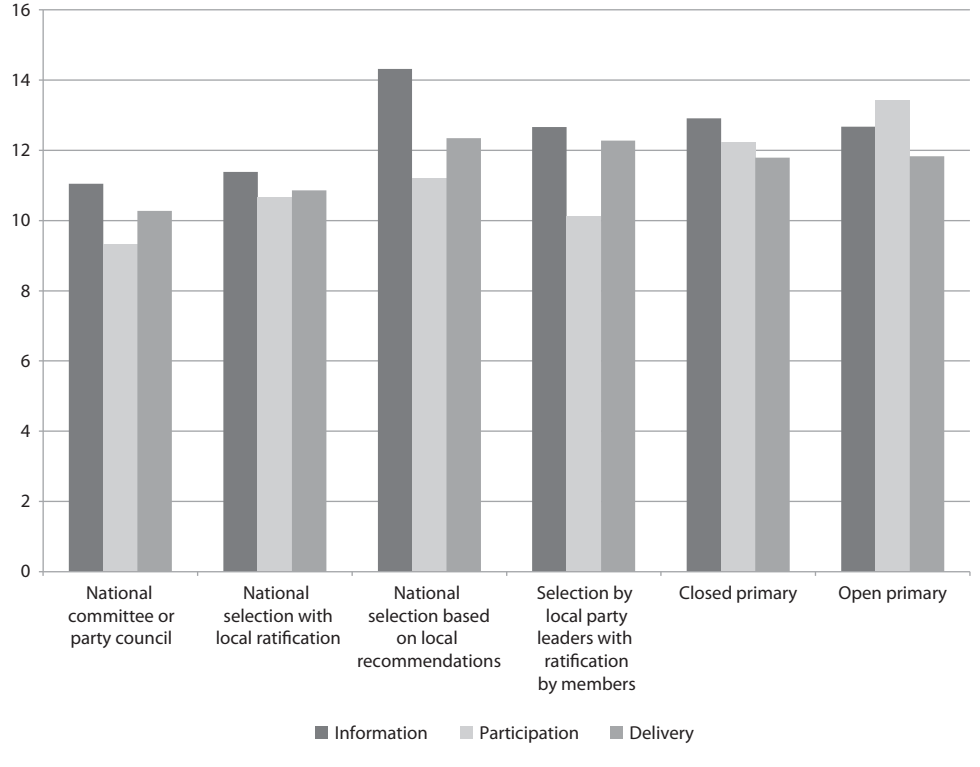

Figure 7.4. Average website indices by candidate selection methods.

actors that employed the five candidate selection methods that were most recurrent in my dataset, from the least inclusive (selection by the national party committee or council) to the most inclusive (open primary). The only pattern that seems to emerge from the data is a mild association between the participation index and the degree of inclusiveness in candidate selection methods. The websites of parties that choose their candidates through open primaries achieve participation indices 4 points higher than those whose candidates are selected by a national committee and 3 points higher than those where national councils select candidates that are then ratified locally. By contrast, no clear patterns emerge for the information and delivery indices. The picture is similar if we consider the association between the procedures employed to select party leaders and the indices measuring website characteristics, which I only summarize here. Some differences emerge in the participation index (the websites of political actors that let their members elect the leader with a direct ballot score 4.5 points higher than those in which parliamentary delegations have this power), but, once again, no pattern can be identified with respect to information and delivery. In sum, the differences based on parties' ideological families are stronger and more consistent, at least in terms of bivariate associations, than those based on the inclusiveness of leader and candidate selection criteria.

In analyzing how various independent variables affect political websites, I have considered these causal relationships in isolation, rather than assessing them simultaneously. I have also not yet addressed some of the hypotheses and research questions related to political websites presented in chapter 2—in particular, the impact of political trust, political participation, and electoral context. To fully assess all these causal dynamics, a multivariate analysis, presented in the next chapter, is required.

CHAPTER EIGHT

What Drives the Online Presence of Parties and Candidates?

In the previous chapters, we have looked at how parties and candidates structure their websites and found that, rather than rushing to include all theoretically available functions, they selectively decide which features to employ and which ones to forgo. Contrary to many earlier observations, they do not necessarily prioritize top-down information tools at the expense of bottom-up participation opportunities, but the functions that are most common have to do with the design and delivery of website contents. We have also analyzed the inequalities between different political actors' online presence and found that they are related to disparities in resources and electoral strength among parties rather than to countries' uneven levels of technological development. Inequalities among political websites, however, are greater when majoritarian rather than proportional electoral systems are employed because of the different incentives that these rules present to smaller parties. We have also discussed the competitive patterns of online campaigning and found that, in general, challengers are not more likely than incumbents to invest in digital media. Furthermore, progressive parties tend to offer richer websites than their conservative counterparts. While this may be partially

due to parties' organizational structures and cultures, two-way associations cannot fully disentangle whether and to what extent ideology and organization affect political actors' online strategies. Other relevant macro-level variables, such as political trust, participation, and electoral context, may also be related to the characteristics of political websites (see chapter 2).

Explaining Website Functions

In order to better understand the patterns that shape the supply of online political communication, I have built three multivariate regression models that predict the values of the indices of information, participation, and delivery in party and candidate websites. According to my theoretical framework, the models include independent variables that are located at both the macro (systemic) and meso (organizational) levels.

The models account for the systemic differences between the seven countries included in this study through variables that measure the following five characteristics:

1. Technological development, defined as the diffusion within the population of internet access and broadband connections[1]
2. Political trust, defined as the diffusion of positive evaluations of the political authorities (parties) and regime (government and democracy) in every country[2]
3. Political participation, defined as the percentage of eligible citizens who voted in the upcoming election, or in the previous comparable election for analyses of websites during nonelectoral periods[3]
4. The electoral system, distinguishing between majoritarian and proportional systems and accounting for intracountry variations in electoral systems[4]
5. A set of country dummy variables that are able to account for the residual structural differences between national political systems that are not captured by the variables listed so far[5]

Among the structural factors, I also included two variables aimed at controlling for the temporal dimension of the analysis:

1. A measure of the passing of time (the number of months since the analysis started in January 2006), which may be correlated with an

increase in the sophistication of websites because technology tends to become cheaper and more commonly used over time.

2. The number of months separating the website observation and the next general election,[6] which may affect political actors' efforts and preparation because they may step up their communications when election day nears and phase them out when a national campaign is not within sight

The organizational differences between individual parties and candidates are captured in the model by variables that measure the following five characteristics:

1. The amount of financial resources (expressed as their equivalent purchasing power in US dollars) available throughout the year or campaign cycle when the observation was conducted[7]
2. The difference between parties and candidates, measured as a dichotomy (0 for candidates and 1 for parties), which may be relevant because, while the former have larger staffs and broader goals, the latter tend to assemble more nimble election-specific networks that may be less resistant to change
3. Incumbency in national government, measured as a dichotomy (0 for absence and 1 for presence)
4. Inclusiveness in leader and candidate selection, with normalized values ranging from the least (0) to the most (1) inclusive method[8]
5. The ideological family to which the (candidate's) party belongs,[9] entered as a set of dummy variables comparing each ideological family with Conservatives, which I have identified as the reference category

Table 8.1 shows the results of the multivariate regression models that I have just described. Structural and organizational variables are grouped separately.[10] While, as we will see, some of the structural variables have a relatively strong correlation with some indices of website characteristics, system-level features provide only a minor contribution to the models' explanatory power. In other words, context does affect parties' and candidates' online communication, but political actors' organizational characteristics play a greater role. Thus, there are more similarities among the institutional websites of *similar parties in different countries* than among those of *different parties in similar*

Table 8.1. Estimated Coefficients for Indices of Website Information, Participation and Delivery by Technological Development, Sociopolitical Environment, and Party Characteristics ($N = 455$)

	Information		Participation		Delivery	
	Coeff.	s.e.	Coeff.	s.e.	Coeff.	s.e.
Constant	12.258	8.472	16.094#	9.304	4.133	7.882
Country (Australia = ref.)						
France	1.172	1.002	2.064#	1.101	2.491**	.933
Italy	–3.850	3.123	–2.771	3.429	1.482	2.905
Germany	.322	1.412	5.495***	1.551	2.608	1.314
Spain	1.166	2.152	1.024	2.363	4.420*	2.002
United Kingdom	3.908*	1.587	4.867**	1.743	1.723	1.476
United States	1.814	1.239	4.739***	1.361	1.942#	1.153
Month (Jan. 2006 = 1)	.033	.040	.124**	.044	–.014	.037
Months to next general election	.002	.017	–.018	.018	–.017	.015
Technological development (%)	–.113	.172	–.203	.189	.124	.160
Political trust (%)	–.008	.045	–.024	.049	–.053	.042
Voter turnout (%)	.055***	.015	.011	.016	.028*	.014
Majoritarian electoral system	–2.175***	.680	–.562	.747	–.928	.633
Financial resources (PPP $ million)	.021***	.003	.016***	.004	.018***	.003
Party (vs. candidate)	1.249#	.655	.193	.720	.000	.610
Incumbent in national government	.723	.471	–.432	.517	.290	.438
Inclusiveness in leader selection (0–1)	–.545	.654	1.864**	.719	.762	.609
Inclusiveness in candidate selection (0–1)	2.242***	.648	.513	.711	.330	.603
Ideological family (Christian-democrat/conservative = ref.)						
Communist and radical left	.207	.579	–2.255***	.636	–.532	.539
Green	1.675*	.658	.180	.723	1.173#	.612
Socialist/democratic	1.096*	.524	1.249*	.575	.357	.487
Left-libertarian	.112	.747	.946	.820	.685	.695
Regionalist	–1.596*	.626	–2.774***	.688	–1.259*	.583
Liberal	.152	.766	.359	.841	–.207	.712
Radical right	.221	.644	–1.383#	.707	–1.371*	.599
F-statistic (df = 24)	9.488***		13.430***		8.974***	
Adjusted R^2	.309		.396		.286	

#$p \leq .1$
*$p \leq .05$
**$p \leq .01$
***$p \leq .001$

countries. As can be seen from the values of the adjusted R^2 coefficients at the bottom of table 8.1, the full model accounts for about one-third of the total variance in information, and more than two-fifths in the participation index. By contrast, a model that includes only the macro-level variables shown in

the upper rows of table 8.1 accounts for less than one-tenth of the variance in the information and delivery indices and about one-sixth of the variance in the participation index.[11]

Given the diversity of the chosen cases within the realm of established Western democracies (see chapter 2),[12] these findings suggest that a process of *cross-country standardization* in online campaigning is occurring. After more than a decade of experimentation, institutional political websites have now emerged as a codified genre in political communication. This pattern confirms what we saw in chapter 5, where we found that most political actors across the Western world feature a "kernel" of core features on their online presence. The results of the regression models suggest that they also offer a similar number of web tools regardless of context, particularly with respect to information and delivery functions—perhaps because it is easy for e-campaigning staffs to look at the websites of their foreign and domestic competitors and counterparts for inspiration on how to design and improve their own. Most online tools can be imitated relatively quickly, at least in terms of making them technically available. (Whether they are supported by an adequate back-end organization may be a different matter, as we saw with the email response rates.) Finding specialized consulting and technological companies that can help implement the desired features is also relatively easy. Because these companies tend to work for multiple clients, both domestic and international, they also tend to offer the same, or similar, packages to different customers. As a result, national contexts are less relevant in shaping political websites than organizational features shared by similar parties and candidates in different countries. Selective adoption of specific digital applications by political actors is confirmed by the analysis, but it is rooted mostly in organizational rather than systemic considerations.

The results of the statistical models can be discussed on the basis of the three main areas of inquiry of this book—inequalities, engagement, and competition—in both their meso- and macro-level articulations.

As we saw in chapter 6, *inequalities* are rooted less in country-level differences in technological development than in imbalances in the resources that are available to parties and candidates. The results of the regressions confirm that financial inequalities among parties and candidates in the same country affect their online efforts much more strongly than differential levels of technological diffusion across countries. The amount of financial resources that each party and candidate could rely on was positively and significantly

associated with all three indices measuring website characteristics. The values of the coefficients indicate that, all else considered, an increase of funds equivalent to the purchasing power of $20 million (in US dollars) corresponds to one more function available overall on the party or candidate website; a $50 million gap fosters about three more functions, almost evenly distributed between information, participation, and delivery. To be sure, the magnitude of the effect is not staggering and suggests that resources are only part of the story, but this is the only variable whose coefficients are statistically significant in all three models.

By contrast, the data show no correlation between the diffusion and quality of internet connections and use in a country and the online performance of its main political actors. The coefficients for technological development are never significant and are indeed negative in two out of three models. The passing of time is positively and significantly correlated with the participation index, so that every two years any political website should be expected to add about three engagement functions regardless of technological development and other variables included in the model. Because diffusion of internet connections—which tends to increase with time—is already controlled for in the model, this finding can be attributed to *domestication*, the process by which certain uses of technology become more common among the population and elites and thus come to be identified as standard features of a particular communication genre. At least in the rich and mature democracies included in this study, parties and candidates do not calculate how to structure their online presence on the basis of how large their potential web audiences are. Rather, they try to meet their users' evolving expectations and develop their internet presence according to their own resources and capabilities, as well as organizational considerations.

Engagement affects parties' and candidates' online presence in various ways. First, there is a strong, positive correlation between the inclusiveness of the methods by which a party selects its leader and candidates and the number of characteristics that can be found on its (and its presidential candidates' and leaders') websites. In particular, online information is positively related to inclusiveness in candidate selection, and participation to inclusiveness in leader selection. Because these variables have been normalized with values ranging from 0 (least inclusive) to 1 (most inclusive), the coefficients imply that the website of a party that chooses its leader through the vote of party

supporters should present about two more participation functions than that of a similar party whose leader is selected by his or her predecessor. Similarly, the website of a party that selects its candidates through open primaries is predicted to offer about two more information tools than that of a similar party whose nominations are centrally determined by a national committee or council. Thus, political organizations that promote participation among their supporters (at least as regards the choice of their leaders and nomination of their parliamentary candidates) also offer more informative and engaging websites. Apparently, the inclusiveness of internal organizational arrangements affects parties' online communication choices. From this standpoint, it is not surprising that no significant correlation was found with respect to website delivery, as these functions pertain to how professional rather than how inclusive the organization is.

Another important finding related to engagement is that political actors use the internet more intensely when voter turnout is higher than when it is lower, controlling for all the other variables included in the model. The coefficient is significant for the information index, which rises by 1 point for an 18% additional turnout, and the delivery index, for which the model predicts a 1-point growth with a 35% turnout increase. None of these differences is momentous in absolute terms, but they indicate that the intensity of citizen engagement with the election is at least to some degree reflected in parties' and candidates' online efforts. The positive association between turnout and website information and delivery may be interpreted as the result of parties' and candidates' rational choices in resource allocation. In countries where a large part of the electorate flocks to the polls because of institutional factors (such as compulsory voting, as in Australia) or long-standing habits (such as the widespread belief that voting is a civic duty, as in Italy), voter persuasion becomes strategically more relevant than mobilization, and political websites are thus filled with more contents that can help voters make up their minds (information) and that can make the party look efficient and professional (delivery). By contrast, these functions are downplayed when increasing electoral participation through mobilization is a more relevant concern, such as in low-turnout US primary and general elections. Even within the same country, parties reduce their online efforts in second-order elections, such as those for the European Parliament, compared to general elections, where turnout is generally higher.

No significant correlation was found between website characteristics and aggregate political trust. Thus, the degree to which citizens assess parties, government, and the functioning of democracy in a favorable way does not affect political actors' online efforts in any relevant way. This finding is relatively surprising in light of widespread popular and academic portraits of the internet as a possible remedy to voter apathy and citizen disaffection. However, the fact that coefficients, albeit small and statistically not significant, are negative in all three models suggests that critical evaluations by citizens may to some degree motivate political actors to improve their online communication. To the extent that such an improvement occurs, it appears to be more cosmetic than substantive, as indicated by the fact that the highest coefficient involves website delivery rather than information and participation. Finally, all else considered, party websites tend to offer about one more informative function than candidate websites. The most likely reason is that parties have more complex organizations and longer stories to tell voters. However, no significant differences were found between parties and candidates with respect to participation and delivery.

Competition at both the organizational and structural levels also has relevant implications for political websites. Parties' and candidates' ideological orientation turns out to strongly and significantly affect their online presence, as can be seen from the party family coefficients. In particular, the model predicts that, all else considered, the website of a socialist political actor should have one more function for information and one more for participation compared to that of a similar conservative party or candidate. The multivariate analysis thus confirms that, in the web-based competition between socialists and conservatives (the two main party groupings that battle for government in most Western democracies), center-left political actors tend to outperform their center-right counterparts. This ideological divide is confirmed by the fact that the estimated differences are even more pronounced if conservative websites are compared with those of green political actors, which, all else considered, are predicted to offer almost two informative and one delivery functions more than conservatives. The analysis also shows that extremist parties on both sides of the political spectrum tend to be relatively aloof in their online endeavors, particularly with respect to participation functions, even when resources and other organizational differences are taken into account. Finally, regionalist parties are predicted to offer the lowest

number of features on their websites across all dimensions. Online political competition is thus being won by progressives (particularly, green and socialist parties) over conservatives and is not being pursued intensely by radical forces. The multivariate analysis confirms that incumbency plays no significant role in the development of parties' and candidates' web presence, as was also shown in chapter 7: the incumbency coefficient is not significant in any of the three models and is positive, rather than negative, in two of them.

The context of political competition also has some repercussions on the digital strategies of political actors. Majoritarian electoral systems are negatively correlated with all indices, with a strong and significant coefficient for information functions. The website of a party or candidate competing in an election run with a proportional system is thus expected to offer about two more such features than can be found in the online presence of an equivalent political actor running with proportional rules. As we saw in chapter 6, small parties in majoritarian systems have few or no possibilities to win seats and thus their motivations to compete intensely both online and offline are weaker than those of comparable parties in majoritarian systems. Political context also interacts with online competition to the extent that parties and candidates tend to step up their online efforts as the general election nears, which is shown by the negative correlations between the number of months until the vote and the indices of participation and delivery, which, however, fail to achieve statistical significance.

Finally, what can be learned from the dummy variables that were included in the models to allow the clustering of parties and candidates based on the countries where they compete? Eight out of sixteen country coefficients achieved statistical significance,[13] four predicting participation and three delivery. Thus, country contextual differences should not be overlooked when studying the supply side of digital politics, even if differences among political actors are generally more relevant. The findings suggest that, once all other factors are taken into account, not only the US but also the British and French political systems are associated with vigorous online efforts by parties and candidates, as these countries' coefficients are positively and significantly correlated with two out of three website indices. As suggested above, country-level differences (not already accounted for by the other structural independent variables in the model) seem to be particularly relevant with respect to

website functions that enable user participation—a realm in which, all else considered, German political actors turn out to be the most active.

As discussed in chapter 3, it is precisely the participatory dimension of digital media that often elicits reluctance and resistance among institutional political actors. Conversely, the presence or absence of adequate institutional incentives may be crucial to overcome this inertia. However, the fact that not only the United States is associated with higher numbers of website features suggests that, although the US institutional system provides strong incentives to online campaigning (Anstead and Chadwick 2009), other, quite different political systems do so as well, possibly through different causal mechanisms. In France, the direct election of presidents and the historic weakness of parties as organizations (Knapp 2002) are conducive to candidate-centered campaigns and feeble party structures that are less resistant to changes in communication tactics. In the United Kingdom, despite the disappointment with which many commentators welcomed the 2010 online campaign, cultural proximity may enhance the tendency to emulate American models, thus augmenting the ambition and the outputs, if not the outcomes, of parties' digital efforts. In Germany, enabling citizen engagement online may be an important concern for parties that strive to revive the mass-based, participatory model of the *Volkspartei* (see chapter 4). By contrast, the online efforts of Australian parties may be depressed—particularly with respect to participation—because compulsory voting makes electoral mobilization superfluous (McAllister 2002). In Italy, the centrality of television as the main arena of political communication—especially for center-right parties—and the sclerosis of party structures and organizational cultures may have hindered the supply side of digital politics.

A Coda on Email Responsiveness

The additive indices that I have analyzed so far are useful summary assessments of complex communication apparatuses such as political websites. As we saw in chapter 5, however, they are the result of many different choices by parties and candidates. Theoretically, the adoption of each online tool may be governed by a causal logic of its own and may, thus, result in different decisions by different political actors in different contexts. While repeating the multivariate analyses shown in the previous paragraphs for all the variables

measuring individual online features is theoretically possible, showing and discussing the results would be so complex to require a book of its own. One type of website feature that deserves closer inspection, however, is political actors' email responsiveness. That more than seven out of ten emails asking for clarifications on policy issues and two out of three messages pledging a desire to volunteer went unanswered (excluding automated responses) is arguably the most surprising (and disappointing) finding in my study of parties' and candidates' online presence (see chapter 5). For all the functions that they strive to amass on their websites, most political actors have not shown the ability, or the willingness, to deal with inputs and requests from their online audiences. Given how important this type of responsiveness may be for citizens who initiate the exchange, it is thus worth asking what may cause this pattern and what emails, in which context, and directed to which organizations have greater chances of receiving a response.

In order to answer these questions, I have transformed the original email responsiveness variables from ordinal to dichotomous, thus discriminating between those parties and candidates that replied to emails and those that did not and discounting the time it took them to write back. The reason is that, although the swiftness of the response is important, the greatest divide is between parties that reply and those that do not. From the user's perspective, getting a slow response may elicit much less disappointment than receiving no response at all. The two dichotomous variables—one for the issue question, one for the volunteer pledge[14]—were entered as dependent variables in logistic regression models that featured the same independent variables as the models predicting website indices that were discussed above (see table 8.2).

Like the previous models, country-level structural variables help explain email responsiveness to some extent, but party-level organizational variables are more predictive of the final outcome.[15] Interestingly, however, the correlations with the country variables are almost a mirror image of those in table 8.1. Once all other factors are taken into account, parties and candidates in the United States, the United Kingdom, and France are the least likely to answer both types of emails. There may be two explanations for this, one related to the supply and the other to the demand side. As regards the former, because political actors in these countries were found, all else considered, to offer more informative and engaging websites (see table 8.1), they may have

Table 8.2. Estimated Coefficients for Responsiveness to Emails with Issue Questions and Volunteer Pledges by Technological Development, Sociopolitical Environment, and Party Characteristics ($N = 455$)

	Issue Question			Volunteer Pledge		
	Coeff.	s.e.	Exp(b)	Coeff.	s.e.	Exp(b)
Constant	.455	7.166	1.576	.997	6.338	2.710
Country (Australia = ref.)						
France	–2.511**	.852	.081	–1.362#	.772	.256
Italy	–1.794	2.664	.166	–.084	2.351	.920
Germany	–1.339	1.170	.262	–1.227	1.036	.293
Spain	.231	1.841	1.260	.117	1.606	1.124
United Kingdom	–2.637*	1.331	.072	–2.739*	1.177	.065
United States	–5.459***	1.297	.004	–4.080***	1.097	.017
Month (Jan. 2006 = 1)	–.045	.035	.956	–.044	.029	.956
Months to next general election	.005	.014	1.005	–.005	.012	.995
Technological development (%)	.084	.146	1.088	.084	.127	1.087
Political trust (%)	–.071#	.038	.931	–.057#	.034	.944
Voter turnout (%)	–.029*	.014	.971	–.030*	.012	.970
Majoritarian electoral system	.098	.580	1.103	.354	.517	1.425
Financial resources (PPP $million)	.013***	.003	1.013	.009**	.003	1.009
Party (vs. candidate)	–.244	.665	.784	.618	.530	1.855
Incumbent in national government	.444	.436	1.558	–.778*	.348	.459
Inclusiveness in leader selection (0–1)	.082	.590	1.085	.537	.530	1.710
Inclusiveness in candidate selection (0–1)	.985#	.581	2.679	.414	.510	1.514
Ideological family (Christian-democrat/conservative = ref.)						
Communist and radical left	.846	.555	2.330	–.976*	.443	.377
Green	2.284***	.586	9.819	–.246	.491	.782
Socialist/democratic	2.285***	.483	9.828	.824*	.389	2.280
Left-libertarian	2.169***	.652	8.753	.256	.511	1.291
Regionalist	1.447**	.526	4.252	–1.139*	.470	.320
Liberal	.882	.704	2.415	.681	.572	1.976
Radical right	1.257*	.617	3.516	–.930#	.500	.395
Nagelkerke R^2	.403			.371		

#$p \leq .1$
*$p \leq .05$
** $p \leq .01$
***$p \leq .001$

diverted resources and attention toward building these additional functions and away from dealing with incoming emails. They may have also calculated that engaging with supporters through social media and advanced volunteer platforms on their websites is more productive than doing so through email. As a

result, that may have devolved fewer staffers and managerial efforts to answering emails than parties in countries where websites tend to be less sophisticated. A second possible explanation is that, as we will see in chapter 9, many voters in the United States and the United Kingdom engaged with the online campaign. This outpouring of interest may have resulted in a greater influx of emails to parties and candidates, which, in turn, required greater efforts by political actors to effectively respond to all of them.[16] It may thus be that parties and candidates in these countries are faced with more emails from citizens and that, even if they answer a greater *number* of messages than other countries, the *percentage* of inquiries that they leave unanswered turns out to be greater.

Among contextual variables, aggregate voter turnout and political trust significantly affect email responsiveness. Turnout is negatively correlated with response rates to both emails, suggesting that parties and candidates are more responsive when they strive to mobilize reluctant voters than when they can by and large take them for granted (or, alternatively, that political actors in low-turnout elections face less attentive publics who are less likely to send them emails and thus to put pressure on their response capacities). Similarly, political actors are more efficient in dealing with email when electorates are more critical of them—perhaps out of fear that systemic support may further deteriorate if they were seen as unresponsive to online solicitations. As with website features writ large, technological development, the passing of time, and the closeness of the next election do not significantly affect email responsiveness. Contrary to the findings in table 8.1, electoral systems are not associated with these dependent variables.

Let us now turn to organizational factors, among which resources, inclusiveness, and ideology play the strongest roles. Financial capital affects both types of email responsiveness to a very similar degree, so that additional moneys equaling the purchasing power of $1 million increase the probability of response by 1%. As we saw for website functions, this is not an enormous difference, but the consistency of this finding highlights the continuing relevance of money in online campaign communications. The coefficients for inclusiveness are also positive, although only the correlation between inclusiveness in candidate selection and responsiveness to issue emails approaches statistical significance. As with website features in general, it is ideology that shows the strongest correlations with email response rates. Once again, socialist and democratic parties outperform Christian-democratic and conservative

ones in responding to both types of emails. As the exp(b) values suggest, the probability of receiving a response to an issue question is ten times greater if the email is directed to a member of the main progressive party family than of the main conservative one, and it is double if the message features a volunteer pledge. These findings thus confirm that the main center-left parties are investing more energies in their online presence than their center-right counterparts. Consistent with the findings on website characteristics, other progressive parties such as the greens (and, in this case, the left-libertarians) are more likely to reply to issue emails, whereas radical parties both left and right perform poorly, particularly with respect to answering email-based volunteer pledges. A voter sending such a message to these parties has about one-third of the probabilities of receiving a response than one that delivers the same email to a conservative party—which, as we saw, is not a very demanding benchmark in and of itself.

Finally, incumbents were significantly less likely than challengers to respond to emails pledging to volunteer (instead, they were more likely, but not significantly so, to answer issue questions). This finding is at odds with those related to the number of website functions. As such, it is the only piece of evidence in this part of my research that corroborates the theory that being out of power systematically creates stronger incentives to adopt digital media. Parties and candidates that are excluded from national government are indeed twice as likely to answer emails offering volunteer time as those that are included in the executive. In addition, no significant difference was found between parties and candidates.

The findings regarding email responsiveness, thus, for the most part confirm those related to website functions as a whole, particularly with respect to the role and relevance of organizational variables. These analyses corroborate each other because they relate to somewhat different aspects of the supply side of digital politics. One the one hand, the tools that are available on political websites offer the technical possibility that information will be consulted and engagement will take place, but users' decisions are required for these outcomes to occur. On the other hand, the successful completion of a dialogue through email entails an actual interaction between political actors and citizens. That similar organizational factors explain both the technical opportunities for and the real occurrence of online information and participation suggests that these two domains are strongly interrelated and can be analyzed as two faces of the same coin.

Conclusions and Moving Forward

As we have seen in the past four chapters, political actors are selective in structuring their online efforts. They carefully assess the political context, particularly the chances of winning seats that the electoral system affords them and the expected intensity of voter participation. They also respond to demands and incentives that derive from their own organizational arrangements, such as the availability of resources, the degree of inclusiveness in their internal decision-making procedures, and the ideological preferences of their elites and voters. All these factors contribute to shaping parties' and candidates' web presence. Thus, to the extent that political actors' websites structure the online experience of their supporters and prospective voters, citizens engaging with politics on the web will encounter contents and opportunities that are markedly different depending on the types of parties and candidates they connect to.

Various implications at both theoretical and normative levels can be derived from these findings.

Inequalities among political parties and candidates exist, are based primarily on the uneven financial resources that are available to them, and affect all dimensions of their online presence, including their propensity to solicit donations through their websites. From this standpoint, in statistical terms, politics online is indeed, to some degree, "politics as usual," as Margolis and Resnick (2000) suggest. Offline hierarchies among political actors are not shattered or overturned on the internet because, even if the direct and opportunity costs of digital tools are still generally lower than for other media, parties and candidates with limited capital must still make difficult choices in allocating scarce resources. As the internet becomes increasingly integrated with other communication and organization functions, it requires expanding staff support and skills (both technical and managerial) that are not necessarily offered by well-meaning, untrained volunteers. That being said, the analysis also revealed various qualifications that lead to a better understanding of digital politics than can be offered by the simple notion of normalization. First, this statistical finding does not mean that poorer parties are doomed in their digital efforts, as many cases can be found of minor parties and candidates that outperform major ones. (Incidentally, this may be due to both disproportionate efforts by the former and neglect of the internet among the latter.) Second, the number of features that money can buy, as predicted

by my models, is not tremendous. Third, the impact of resources can be balanced by the effect of other characteristics, particularly organizational inclusiveness. Fourth, resources are more relevant in majoritarian than proportional electoral systems owing to the different structures of incentives fostered by these rules, particularly as they affect smaller parties. Seen in this light, normalization is more an American finding—related to the wide financial and electoral disparities between US major and minor parties—than a general theory that is valid everywhere without qualifications.

Engagement is an important dimension of digital politics, consistent with the high-choice affordances of the internet. In particular, there is a positive relationship between parties' organizational inclusiveness and their online endeavors. This finding lends some credence to the notion that digital media find a more fertile terrain among political actors that are already used to promoting some forms of participation among their members and supporters offline. Because arrangements of internal democracy such as primaries have seen a moderate increase among Western parties in the last decades (Norris 2006: 93), we can expect that digital media may be welcomed with diminishing diffidence if parties continue opening their internal decision making to broader constituencies. A mutually reinforcing dynamic between these two developments may even arise. The more inclusive parties are, the more they rely on the web and, in so doing, involve wider—or, at least, different—groups of members and supporters in their internal workings. Greater avenues for online participation might offer new windows of opportunity through which technologically skilled activists may then increase their power within the organization at the expense of other midlevel elites who are less confident with digital media. In trying to win these internal battles, digital activists may lobby in their own interest for even greater inclusiveness and deeper online engagement within party structures, thus further pushing the envelope for innovation. To the extent that more inclusive parties are also more at ease with the internet, web-savvy activists may be disproportionally empowered in these organizations. The internal balance of power within parties may thus be tilted in their favor, which may result in pressures for even more ambitious online efforts. The importance of parties' inclusiveness for their digital communication also sheds light on a crucial difference between the United States and other Western democracies. Whereas primaries are used for candidate selection at all levels and without exception (save for the lack of

challengers) in the United States (Ware 2002), parties in other political systems rely on a much wider, evolving, and often disputed array of candidate and leader selection methods (Rahat and Hazan 2010). As a result, what is essentially a constant in the United States is instead a variable, and the source of lively and articulated internal debates, in other Western countries. Thus, as suggested by Anstead and Chadwick (2009: 65–66), to the extent that the United States differs from most other democratic political systems in this respect, the role of digital media and the scope of parties' and candidates' online efforts should be expected to differ as well, contrary to simplistic notions of Americanization.

Online *competition*, at least as manifested through institutional websites, does not seem to disproportionately favor challengers over incumbents, as has often been found in the United States. Instead, parties' and candidates' online presence is more strongly and systematically connected to the ideological family they belong to. In particular, nonradical progressive parties such as socialists, social-democrats, democrats, and greens have outperformed Christian-democrats and conservatives, at least within the spatial and temporal boundaries of this research. (Whereas Germany seems to escape this pattern, its political context was also unique because the Christian-democratic and Social-democratic parties governed together in a grand coalition when the data were collected.) As suggested in chapter 3, the reasons for this ideological affinity may be threefold.

First, progressive party elites and apparatuses may be more at ease with digital media than conservative ones. I neither intend this as the sole explanation for this pattern nor assume that such preferences may not change as parties' internal balance of power and sources of electoral support change. In other words, the relationship between parties' and candidates' ideology and the number of features on their institutional websites should not be understood as deterministic, not least because a multicausal explanation seems more appropriate. Second, most international companies that market advanced digital services to political clients are based in the United States, and in the early twenty-first century American progressives have generally prevailed over conservatives across many digital domains and types of organizations (Karpf 2012). As a result, because innovation tends to diffuse among similar organizations that have ties to each other, center-left parties outside the United States may have benefited from the influx of their American peers

more than their center-right competitors. Third, political actors may be anticipating that progressive voters may be more keen than conservatives on informing themselves and participating in politics through digital media (which, as we will see in part III, turned out to be the case more often than not). Building more informing and engaging websites might thus be a rational response to higher supporter demand for these functions.

Regardless of the reasons why this ideological gap in the supply of digital politics exists, it may have relevant implications in the future if it were to persist over time. To the extent that an effective online presence becomes an increasingly relevant component of parties' and candidates' communication tool kits, conservative forces may need to quickly adjust their approaches and strategies to make up for lost ground. I concur with Karpf's (2012) insight that innovation in political organization and communication is path dependent and best described as a series of punctuated equilibria, so that the constant changes in digital media may open many opportunities for conservatives to regain momentum. However, the question whether the left and the right are approaching digital media with uneven efforts and results should be continuously scrutinized in future research.

Understanding the institutional supply side of internet politics—that is, parties' and candidates' websites—is important because, as we have seen here, it varies substantially (and, to some extent, predictably) across different political contexts and actors. At the same time, this is only one side of the coin, the other being the demand side—that is, citizens' online political behavior—on which part III will now focus.

CHAPTER NINE

Online Political Information in Seven Countries

Democracy requires that citizens possess adequate knowledge of public affairs to cast an informed vote and keep government accountable (Norris 2000). However, most voters do not acquire and constantly update as much political information as would be ideally desirable (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Hibbing and Thesis-Morse 2002); instead, they behave as "cognitive misers" (Fiske and Taylor 1984), retrieving, processing, and storing only limited amounts of information. This strategy can be seen as rational because one's vote has almost no probability to affect the final outcome of an election and, thus, being fully informed has no practical consequences (Downs 1957). As a result, rather than constantly scrutinizing the whole political landscape, voters rely on "information shortcuts" that can help them make political decisions with minimal cognitive efforts (Popkin 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998), and they increase their attention only when they become aware of critical events or situations (Schudson 1998). Because it is the media that alert citizens of troubling issues, the structure and functioning of media systems can go a long way toward explaining their political knowledge (Curran et al. 2009; Shehata and Strömbäck 2011). Individual-level

factors such as education and political interest, however, are the strongest predictors of citizens' political information (Zaller 1992). As highlighted in chapter 4, these factors may be particularly relevant on the internet, because its "pull" affordances allow—and, to some extent, compel—users to constantly choose which contents to access and which ones to avoid. If most citizens rationally ignore public affairs offline, they may do so even more online (Prior 2007; Hindman 2008). Not only are these issues relevant for the overall quality of democracy, understood as government by public opinion, but they also involve political representation and equality among citizens. To the extent that some voters are better informed than others, they will be able to more clearly identify political decisions and actors that can affect their interests and, thus, to voice their preferences in these domains and toward these targets more strongly than those who are less knowledgeable (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Because using digital media for political information can increase political knowledge (Dimitrova et al. 2011), assessing the extent to which and the reasons why citizens take advantage of the internet to acquire political news can shed light on important issues for representation, equality, and democracy.

This chapter sets the comparative framework on which the remaining chapters in part III will build. Toward this end, I compare the percentages of citizens who used the internet to get political information during the last national general election campaign in the seven countries included in this research between 2006 and 2010. In chronological order, the data refer to the French presidential elections in 2007, Italian and Spanish parliamentary elections and US presidential elections in 2008, German parliamentary elections in 2009, and UK and Australian parliamentary elections in 2010. National election surveys in all these countries included at least one question that measured use of the internet for campaign-related news.[1] Data on parliamentary elections in Italy (2006) and Australia (2007) are also used for longitudinal comparisons in these two countries, the only ones where general elections were held twice in the time frame of this research.

As can be seen in figure 9.1, percentages of citizens who paid attention to the campaign online vary widely across the seven political systems included in this study. For instance, in 2008 three times more Americans got election-related information on the internet than Italians did. As a percentage of both the population and internet users, American citizens show a much greater inclination than voters in any other country to engage with the campaign

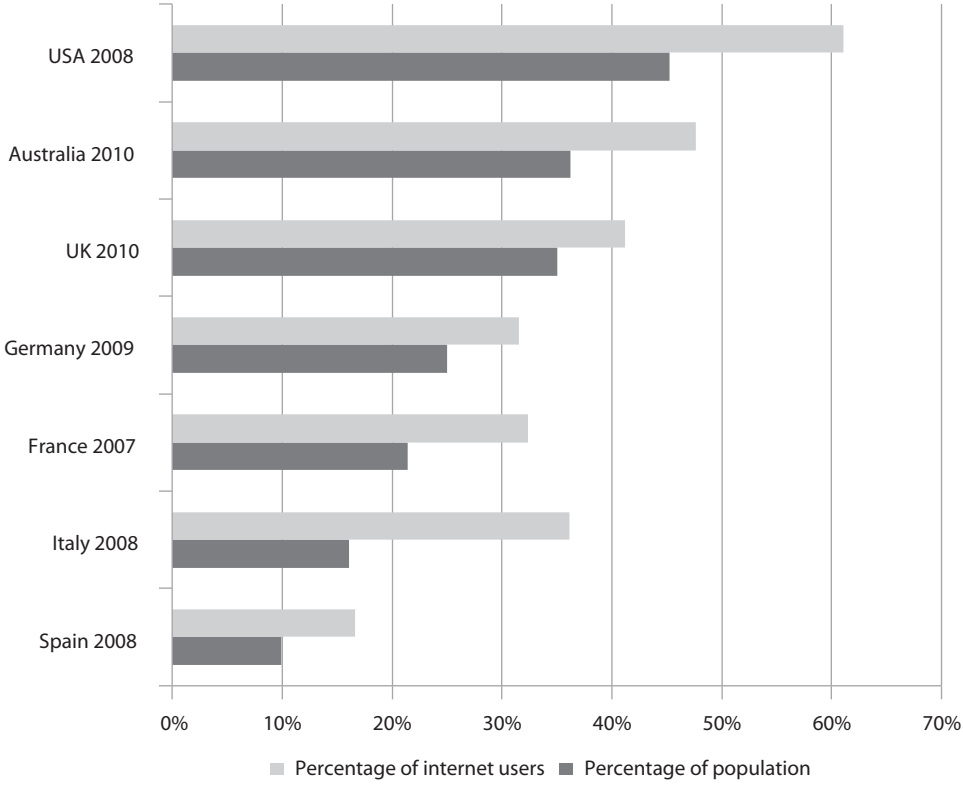

Figure 9.1. Citizens seeking political information online during general elections. *Note:* Percentages of internet users were calculated based on estimates by the International Telecommunication Union for each country and each year.

online. Almost half of citizens and almost two-thirds of internet users in the United States got some information on the web about the 2008 elections, a significantly larger proportion that in the countries that took second and third place—Australia and the United Kingdom (with about one-third of the population and a little less than half of internet users relying on the web for campaign news). The American prominence is even more remarkable in light of the fact that the US measurements were taken two years earlier than those in Australia and the United Kingdom. Considering how consequential two years can be in the development of online politics, this suggests that the relative distance between these countries may be even greater. This point is proved by the fact that in 2007, according to the Australian Election Study

data, the percentage of Australians that went online for campaign information was 19.9% (and 28.6% among internet users), less than half that in the United States one year later. The gap between the United States and other Western democracies is thus remarkable, even if we acknowledge that the 2008 presidential election may have been somewhat exceptional because of the breakthrough in online campaigning by Barack Obama and the high level of attention and participation among the population.

These first comparative findings further reinforce one of the key ideas that inspired this research: that the United States should not be treated as a typical case in the development of digital politics. There simply is no comparison to the American population's eagerness to go online for campaign information, at least in the years considered and within the realm of Western democracies included in this research. The distance between the United States and other countries in this respect is even larger than in terms of the sophistication of parties' and candidates' websites, where American political actors edged all others included in this study with respect to participation but not information and delivery (see chapter 6). Thus, there seems to be a virtuous circle of supply and demand between US voters and politicians: the former take part enthusiastically in the online campaign, and the latter are more prepared to take advantage of their online presence, particularly to facilitate citizen engagement.

The proportion of citizens that went online for election updates in each country is to a significant degree a function of the diffusion of internet access: Pearson's R correlation coefficient between the percentage of the population that used the internet for campaign-related purposes and the percentage of citizens that are internet users in each country is a relatively high .757 ($p = .049$). Italy is the only outlier in this respect. Although by 2008 only 44.5% of its citizens had internet access (by far the lowest percentage in the seven countries included in this study), the percentage of the population that engaged with the campaign online was higher than in Spain, and as a percentage of internet users, more Italians got campaign news on the web than the Germans, French, and Spaniards did.

The data also suggest that there are relevant differences between the three Anglo-Saxon countries in this study (the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom) and the four countries from Continental Europe (Germany, France, Italy, and Spain), with the former group showing consistently higher percentages of citizens and internet users who engaged with the online cam-

paign. On the one hand, this finding reaffirms that evidence from English-speaking countries—which tend to absorb most of the international research on internet politics—should not be simplistically generalized to any and every political system. In other European countries included in this study, citizens are less eager to engage with the campaign online, even where systemic levels of technological development were similar to those in the United States or United Kingdom. On the other hand, while the American case clearly appears to be deviant compared to the others, the higher values found in Britain and Australia may be at least partially explained by the fact that the general elections they refer to were held at a later point in time than those in France, Germany, Italy, and Spain. Because the percentage of Australians who went online for campaign information increased considerably between 2007 and 2010, and because the Italians who did the same went from 6.5% in the general elections of 2006 to 16.1% in those of 2008 (as a percentage of the population, which among internet users corresponds to 17.1% in 2006 and 36.2% in 2008), it is conceivable that the differences between Australia and the United Kingdom, on the one hand, and the remaining European countries included in this research, on the other, may be somewhat reduced if general elections occurred simultaneously in all these countries. If this were to be true, the United States would stand out even more clearly as an exceptional case.

We can perform a partial test of this hypothesis by looking at how voters in France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom responded to a Eurobarometer survey question administered in the run-up to the 2009 European Parliament elections, as the campaign was going on simultaneously in all these countries. Citizens were asked which sources they preferred for getting information about politics and political matters and could choose a maximum of two items between newspapers, magazines, television, radio, and the internet. To be sure, the construct that is measured by this question deals with the ordering of preferences rather than the reporting of behavior, on which this and the following chapters focus instead.[2] However, assessing the distribution of citizens who named the internet as their first or second favorite source across the five European countries can help us compare their voters' preferences simultaneously—something that cannot be done with general election surveys—as shown in figure 9.2.

The data confirm the relative standing of the five European countries included in the analysis, thus validating the measures shown in figure 9.1. If we look at the percentages of the population that indicated the internet as one of

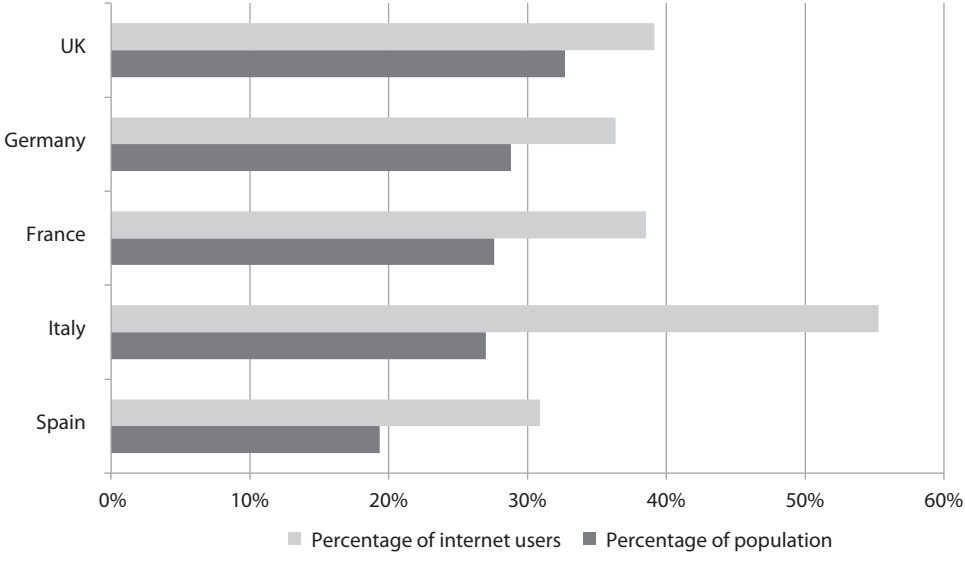

Figure 9.2. Citizens who named the internet as one of their two main sources of campaign information during the 2009 European elections. *Note:* Data from Standard Eurobarometer 71.1. Percentages of internet users were calculated based on estimates by the International Telecommunication Union for each country in 2009.

their two favored sources of information, the order is the same as in the surveys taken in the aftermath of each country's national elections, with the United Kingdom topping the list followed by Germany, France, Italy, and Spain. If we consider the percentages of internet users who named the web as one of their two principal sources in 2009, the countries' order is almost the same as the one resulting from national election surveys. (The only difference is that in 2009 Italy tops the list and the United Kingdom is second, whereas in the former chart the order was reversed; in both datasets, France, Germany, and Spain follow in the same succession.) The data thus also confirm Italy's outlier status with respect to the relationship between technological development and citizens' online political engagement. Although the correlation between these two aggregate variables was still positive in 2009 (with Pearson's $R = .581$, $p = .325$), the percentage of Italians who named the internet as one of their top two sources is higher than internet diffusion would suggest. (Italians with internet access in 2009 were a modest 48.8%, almost 15 percentage points behind Spain, which was second to last at 62.2%.)

Both the Italian and Australian cases are also interesting because the online behaviors of their voters and parties show diverging patterns. Political websites in Australia and Italy offered relatively fewer functions than those in other countries, particularly with respect to participation. By contrast, Australian citizens went online quite keenly for political information in 2010, and Italians did so to a much greater extent than the diffusion of internet access therein would suggest. Thus, in these two countries the relationship between the demand (citizens) and supply (politicians) sides of internet electioneering seems to be weak at best, with the former much more engaged online than the latter.

The data presented in figure 9.1 constitute the dependent variable that the next four chapters attempt to explain in comparative perspective. Because a notable amount of variation exists between countries, I analyze what factors are conducive to citizens' engagement with the online campaign in the seven countries included in this study—based on the premise that acquiring political information is the first step in the ladder of political engagement online. In so doing, I address the fundamental questions that inspired this study, which refer to political inequalities, engagement, and competition in the digital realm. Each of the next three chapters tackles one of these issues through bivariate country-by-country analyses, which allow us to describe the characteristics of online audiences in each country, as well as multivariate regression analyses, which enable us to test causal hypotheses regarding the factors that affect online political information. Chapter 13 specifically focuses on how the results of the multivariate analyses compared across the seven countries, thus highlighting and explaining differences and similarities among these political systems.

CHAPTER TEN

Socioeconomic Inequalities and Online Political Information

Using the survey data shown in the previous chapter, we can assess the extent to which the use of the internet for political information varies among individuals of different social backgrounds and according to their political preferences, propensity to participate in politics, and media usage. Focusing first on socioeconomic inequalities in the seven countries included in this study, I analyze how gender, race, age, education, and income affect the extent to which citizens go online to acquire information about election campaigns. In order to do so, I look at the distribution of these variables one country at a time, relying on both bivariate and multivariate analyses, usually referring to the last general election for which data are available (as of this writing). Bivariate analyses allow us to understand the basic characteristics of the audiences of online politics, while multivariate analyses help us test causal models that predict which factors affect individuals' choice to get political information through the internet in each country. In particular, as specified in chapter 2, the multivariate models include sociodemographic characteristics (gender, race, age, education, urban density, and income), political culture (church attendance, interest in politics, sense of efficacy, and

political trust), political preferences (ideology and party identification), offline political engagement (talking about politics with other people, attending rallies and campaign events, and volunteering for parties or candidates), and media usage (reading political articles in newspapers and watching political programs on television).

Because these models were run with data referring to individual countries, in the following chapters I discuss their results only in terms of whether variables were found to be positively or negatively related with online political information (the dependent variable) and whether the relationship was statistically significant or not. This focus avoids overloading the reader with a large amount of country-specific statistics and refrains from suggesting that the magnitude of the coefficients can be compared directly from country to country. Such comparisons are unfortunately not warranted because of the many differences among the electoral surveys administered in each country (as discussed in chapter 2). However, readers who want to closely examine the statistical results of the logistic regression models for all seven countries can refer to the appendix, where they are reported in their entirety.

Gender and Online Political Information

Many scholars have found political attitudes and behaviors of men and women to differ significantly. In particular, women have often turned out to be less interested and engaged in politics than men (Githens, Norris, and Lovenduski 1994; Carroll and Fox 2006). Gender inequalities in attention to and participation in politics are rooted in various factors. Among the most important are role socializations that encourage women to be politically passive; structural inequalities between men and women in education, occupation, and income; and the division of labor in the household, which overloads women with responsibilities related to the care of the house and the children and thus deprives them of the time and resources necessary for political engagement (Bennett and Bennett 1993; Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001). These gender gaps may in turn be reproduced, and possibly exacerbated, in the political arena, as elected officials may be more responsive to male than female voter preferences to the extent that the latter are less active in voicing their concerns and grievances to political actors and institutions. Rather than closing this gap, the internet may widen it because, as the digital divide literature has found so far, men are more likely than women to have

internet access, to be regular internet users, and to develop advanced computer skills. Consequently, technological inequalities may dovetail with already existing imbalances in political attention and engagement. The result may be self-segregation from internet politics by female citizens and, thus, an even greater political predominance of men over women on the web compared to the already imbalanced offline situation.

The data on citizens' behaviors offer various answers to these questions (table 10.1). On the one hand, in the United States women are *more* rather than less likely than men to get political information through the internet: in 2008, 46% of women and 44% of men went online for campaign news. While this difference is not statistically significant at either bivariate or multivariate levels, the gender-balanced composition of the US online political audience turns out to be an exception rather than the rule across Western democracies. In all other countries included in this study, women were less likely than men to use the internet for political updates, with absolute gaps between male and female voters as large as 10 percentage points in Germany, the United Kingdom, and Italy, and male-female ratios of two to one in Italy and Spain and three to two in Germany, France, and the United Kingdom. Indeed, only in Australia was the difference between male and female voters so small to be at least comparable to the situation in the United States, but even here the multivariate analysis revealed that men are significantly more likely than women to rely on the internet for political information once other factors were taken into account.

Table 10.1. The Gender Gap in Online Political Information

	Male	Female	Difference	Sig. (*F*-test)	Multivariate (male)
Australia	37.7%	34.8%	2.9%	.181	+
France	25.3%	17.8%	7.5%	.000	+
Germany	31.2%	19.1%	12.1%	.000	+
Italy	21.1%	11.5%	9.6%	.000	(+)
Spain	13.6%	6.4%	7.2%	.000	+
United Kingdom	40.1%	28.4%	11.7%	.000	+
United States	44.2%	46.1%	–2.0%	.385	(–)

Note: In the last column, + indicates a statistically significant ($p \leq .05$) positive relationship, (+) indicates a statistically not significant positive relationship, – indicates a statistically significant negative relationship, (–) indicates a statistically not significant negative relationship, and // indicates that the variable was not included in the model.

The evidence thus unmistakably suggests that the gender gap in online political information is far from being closed. The deviant case of the United States in this respect is somewhat surprising as this country does not generally stand out, among those included in this study, as the one where the societal conditions and opportunities of males and females are the most equal.[1] That being said, the near universality of this web-based gender gap across different institutional, cultural, and policy contexts is remarkable and speaks to the continuing difficulties in promoting gender political equality on the internet.

The fact that women are less likely than men to get political information online may be at least partially explained by gender imbalances in internet access. Unfortunately, we can control for this variable in only three countries—Australia, Germany, and the United States—since internet access was not probed in the remaining surveys. In Australia, male gender remains positively and significantly correlated with online political information even after controlling for internet use; in Germany, the coefficient remains positive but loses statistical significance; finally, in the United States the relationship remains negative and as close as possible ($p = .051$) to the conventional threshold for statistical significance when internet access is included in the model. Thus, at least in Germany the gender gap in online political information may be partially narrowed by increasing internet use among women, but the empirical reality suggests that the political web is a rather unequal environment with respect to gender. The implications may be profound because getting political information on the internet can be considered as a first step in a complex and multifaceted ladder of engagement, possibly leading to more demanding and effective modes of political voice and participation.

Race

My analysis of the relationship between race and online political information focuses on the three countries where the political relevance of ethnic differences is greatest: France, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In all three countries, minorities are a sizable percentage of the resident population and large parts of them enjoy full political rights. They constitute an important voting bloc and tend to be disadvantaged compared to the majority white populations in terms of sociodemographic background, education, income, and, most often, internet access. Importantly, minorities also tend to

participate less than ethnic majorities in offline political activities, including voting (Saggar 2007).

Indeed, if we look at the United States, the country where racial differences have historically been starkest and most politically consequential, in 2008 whites were almost 5 percentage points more likely than nonwhites[2] to use the internet for campaign news. The racial gap, however, was not statistically significant in multivariate models. The particular electoral context of the 2008 US presidential elections may have somewhat diluted the impact of race by mobilizing minority voters because for the first time one of the two major parties nominated an African American candidate, Barack Obama, who ended up winning the election. Obama's landmark candidacy and his focus on the internet as an information and participation channel (Vaccari 2010; Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez 2011) may thus have prompted voters from racial minorities to follow the campaign online more intensely than they previously had. Yet, even under these favorable circumstances the racial gap was not entirely closed.

The US situation is once again rather exceptional in this respect (table 10.2). In ethnically diverse countries such as France and the United Kingdom, the divide in web-based information between majority and minority ethnicities has been not only closed but reverted. In these political systems, to the extent that a racial gap exists, it is based on nonwhites' greater propensity to go online for political information. This "minority gap" is large in both France (amounting to 14.1 percentage points) and the United Kingdom (11.6 points). Thus, while American exceptionalism has a normatively positive coloring with respect to gender, its undertones are grayer when it comes to ethnicity. It must also be acknowledged that in both France and the United Kingdom the negative relationship between white ethnicity and online political information disappears in multivariate models, where the coefficients do not achieve statistical significance. The reasons why race fails to show a significant independent correlation with online information once other variables are taken into account may be similar in all three countries. Voters belonging to ethnic minorities tend to differ substantially in terms of income, education, and interest in politics. To the extent that such variables affect online information, they may depress the impact of racial factors once their causal contribution is taken into account.

If we set aside these interesting country differences, the evidence paints a relatively reassuring picture of racial inequalities in online politics. In France,

Table 10.2. Racial Differences in Online Political Information

	White	Nonwhite	Difference	Sig. (*F*-test)	Multivariate (white)
France	20.4%	34.5%	–14.1%	.000	(–)
United Kingdom	32.6%	44.2%	–11.6%	.000	(+)
United States	46.4%	41.8%	+4.6%	.065	(+)

Note: For the symbols reported in the last column, see table 10.1.

the United Kingdom, and the United States, nonwhites are not less likely than whites to engage with the campaign on the net once other relevant sociodemographic and attitudinal factors are taken into account. To the extent that getting online information is a precondition for greater political involvement on the web, racial minorities are thus not disadvantaged in any significant way compared to white majorities. Actually, in two out of three countries where we examined these differences, minorities are on balance more active online than whites are, which runs counter to most evidence regarding other modes of political engagement. Because citizens of immigrant origins often rely on the internet to keep contact with their countries of birth (Hiller and Franz 2004), they may be more accustomed to and involved with digital media than native citizens. Minorities can also find political information on the internet that is more tailored to their preferences and interests than is the case on other channels, where whites' viewpoints tend to predominate and minorities are often portrayed unfairly (Zilber and Niven 2000).

Age

Age is a realm where online politics may be expected to subvert the causal patterns usually found in offline political information and participation. Young voters are more likely to be regular internet users and more keen on getting information about and participating in politics online. In addition, the possibility that digital media can help rejuvenate political interest, information, and participation among young voters has often been considered one of the most promising democratic outcomes of the internet (Livingstone 2007; Loader 2007; Olsson and Dahlgren 2010). This issue is particularly pressing because young citizens in Western democracies tend to be detached from politics, scarcely supportive of political authorities and institutions, and less likely to participate in conventional political activities, including at the

ballot box (Henn, Weinstein, and Forrest 2005; Mindich 2005; Buzzi, Cavalli, and De Lillo 2007; for more optimistic assessments, see Zukin et al. 2006; Dalton 2009).

In the digital realm, younger voters are indeed more engaged with politics than their older counterparts (table 10.3), and the negative relationship between age and online political information remains strong and statistically significant in multivariate as well as bivariate analyses. After controlling for internet access in the countries where it was measured (Australia, Germany, and the United States), the coefficients for age remain negative and significant. Thus, it is not greater availability of internet access per se that makes young people more likely than their older fellow citizens to get political news on the web. Most likely, internet skills rather than simple access affect this relationship, as younger voters tend to be more knowledgeable about how and where to find and distribute contents, including political ones, through digital media. This may be a generational effect caused by the fact that today's older citizens have limited ability to use computers and other devices needed to access the internet. Alternatively, it may be a life cycle effect related to the continuing evolution of digital media, to which recently socialized citizens may adapt more easily than those who became adults at an earlier technological stage.

However, while voters aged 18 to 29 in all seven countries are universally more likely to use the internet for political information than those aged 65 and older, the data also reveal different age-related patterns from country to country. In the United States, for instance, it is not the youngest age bracket (18–29), but the more mature 30-to-44 cohort that exhibits the greatest pro-

Table 10.3. Age Differences in Online Political Information

	18–29	30–44	45–54	55–64	65+	Multivariate (years)
Australia	61.0%	44.0%	32.3%	24.6%	14.5%	–
France	41.9%	29.4%	14.5%	11.8%	3.2%	–
Germany	37.2%	34.5%	26.9%	20.5%	9.6%	–
Italy	37.9%	20.9%	14.6%	10.4%	3.0%	–
Spain	15.0%	14.1%	11.0%	5.1%	1.1%	–
United Kingdom	51.6%	46.3%	32.8%	25.6%	8.7%	–
United States	52.7%	59.1%	48.4%	37.6%	20.4%	–

Note: All bivariate relationships are significant at $p = .000$ (based on ANOVA F-tests). For the symbols reported in the last column, see table 10.1.

pensity to get political news online. Once again, this finding is exceptional to the United States; in the other six countries, the relationship between age and online political information is entirely linear. Conversely, although digital media surely played an important role in engaging young Americans in politics—and, particularly, the so-called millennial generation (Winograd and Hais 2008) that was aggressively targeted by the Obama campaign—during the 2008 elections, the greatest propensity to acquire political information online among the youth was found in Australia, with more than six in ten of those aged 18–29 using the internet for campaign news.

The slope of the relationship and the width of the gaps between different age groups differ strikingly across countries. In the United States, the youngest cohort is about two and a half times more likely than the oldest one to rely on the web for campaign-related information (52.7% vs. 20.4%). In Germany and Australia the gap is wider, as younger voters are about four times more likely than the oldest group to go online for political news, and the distance between the two extreme age cohorts is even bigger in the United Kingdom, with 18-to-29 year-olds about six times more likely to engage in digital politics than respondents aged 65 or older. These divides, however, look minor when compared with those that can be found in Italy, France, and Spain, where the youngest cohorts are about thirteen times more likely than the oldest ones to use the internet for political information. (In Spain, for instance, 15% of voters aged 18 to 29 went online during the election compared to only 1.1% among those aged 65 or older.) It is hardly a coincidence that the widest age gaps were found in the three countries where citizens turned out to be least likely overall to use the internet for political news (see figure 9.1). The youngest cohorts of voters constitute only a minority (roughly one-fifth) of these populations, while cohorts of older voters tend to be more numerous demographically, so in countries where older citizens are less likely to engage with politics online, the aggregate figures for the whole population will also be lower. For instance, young (18 to 29) Italians are just as likely as young Germans to get their political news online, but in all other cohorts Germans are at least twice as likely to do so as Italians, which results in an aggregate 9% gap between the two countries' populations.

The data thus confirm that age is one of the strongest predictors of online political information but also highlight remarkable country differences in the gaps between younger and older voters. In the United States and Australia and, to a lesser extent, Germany and the United Kingdom, relatively large

percentages of aging and elderly citizens now engage with politics on the web. As a result, the divide with young cohorts, while surely not negligible, is narrower than some popular portrayals of the internet as a youth-only information environment suggest, to the point that in the United States the more mature 30-to-44 age bracket has overtaken the youngest voting-age segment. By contrast, in Italy, France, and Spain a chasm persists between younger and older voters, which warrants the idea that almost only youngsters get their political news on the internet, thus making it a generationally segmented channel. To give readers a sense of how online information is distributed across different age groups in these countries, for each 100 citizens who get their political news through the web in France, 39 are in the 18–29 cohort, whereas only 3 are aged 65 or older. The situation is much less unequal in the United States, where for the same 100 citizens that engage with politics online, about 25 are 18-to-29 year-olds and 8 are over 65 years of age. Despite these important differences, digital media are clearly contributing to balancing the engagement gap between older and younger generations across Western democracies by disproportionately attracting the often politically disengaged youth.

Education

Education has almost invariably been found to be an important precondition for political participation. Citizens with better educational attainments tend to possess greater stocks of civic skills that they can use to make their voices heard in the political arena and that increase their confidence in being able to effectively do so (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Education can also affect individuals' levels of internet skills, which are critical in enhancing citizens' online political experiences, for instance making them more likely to encounter unexpected contents, to effectively deal with information overload, to actively contribute to the flow of communication, and to comfortably perform complex tasks, such as many types of web-based political engagement (Hargittai and Hinnant 2008; Hargittai and Walejko 2008; Anduiza, Gallego, and Cantijoch 2010; Min 2010).

The data confirm that education is among the strongest predictors of internet use for political information. The relationship between educational attainment and exposure to online political news is strong and linear in all seven countries (table 10.4). In particular, citizens with college degrees were

Table 10.4. Education Differences in Online Political Information

	None	Primary	Secondary	Graduate and Postgraduate	Multivariate (type of degree)
Australia	—	25.5%	25.8%	51.9%	+
France	11.1%	16.8%	32.6%	39.5%	+
Germany	11.6%	9.7%	25.7%	50.6%	+
Italy	1.2%	11.9%	24.6%	37.9%	+
Spain	1.1%	5.8%	17.5%	23.3%	+
United Kingdom	8.2%	25.7%	37.4%	54.6%	+
United States	—	9.0%	34.8%	63.6%	+

Note: All bivariate relationships are significant at $p = .000$ (based on ANOVA F-tests). For the symbols reported in the last column, see table 10.1.

between twice (in Australia, the United Kingdom, and France) and seven times (in the United States) more likely than those with primary education to use the web for campaign information. College graduates were between one and a half times (in Australia and the United States) and more than twice (in Spain, Italy, and Germany) more likely than average to get political news on the net. The positive direction and statistical significance of these relationships were unanimously confirmed by multivariate analyses, including those that controlled for internet access.

Unequal educational attainment is one of the greatest sources of discriminations in citizens' online political engagement. On the one hand, people with better education tend to be more interested in politics, so that education affects individuals' motivations to get political news, both online and offline. On the other hand, education also correlates with both civic and computer skills, thus equipping individuals with the practical knowledge that is necessary to take part in politics through digital media. Conversely, the audience for online politics is strongly biased toward better-educated individuals and leaves out most of those who did not obtain a secondary degree. This correlation is particularly troublesome in those countries, such as Italy and Spain, where nearly half the population has not completed higher education, but it is also problematic in Australia and France, where little less than one-third of citizens stopped short of this mark.[3] Another interesting finding is that the strength of this relationship varies less across countries than the other relationships analyzed so far. In other words, not only the direction but also the magnitude of the effects of education are similar in the seven countries we are

studying. These results were far from unexpected, given the existing theory and research on political participation both offline and online. However, they still usefully remind us that online inequalities do not depend only on generational differences in technological prowess (which may wash out over time) or on individuals' preferences as to whether or not to engage with politics, but also on a key component of their socioeconomic status.

Income

While education-based disparities in political information and participation are clearly problematic for democracy, inequalities rooted in income may be even more troublesome. If income turned out to significantly predict online political activity, then Elmer Schattschneider's famous statement on American pluralism—that "the flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent" (Schattschneider 1960: 35)—would still be valid in the internet age. While the digital and political divides related to gender and education ring disturbing alarm bells for proponents of the web's democratic potential, wide and persistent divisions based on income may by all means terminate such hopes.

To address these issues, the country samples were divided between the richest and poorest fourths of the populations, with two intermediate groups constituting the second-to-first richest and poorest groups. The data are not available for Italy because survey respondents therein were not asked to directly provide an estimate of their earnings but rather just to indicate their profession, from which no reliable indication of income can be derived that can help us draw a meaningful comparison.[4] Table 10.5 presents the percentages of citizens that in each country went online for campaign news according to the income quartile they are part of.

At first glance, the patterns that can be noted are similar to those found for education: the bivariate relationship between income and use of the internet for political information is positive, linear, and significant in all countries. The fourth of the population that reports the highest family incomes tends to be about twice as likely to go online for campaign news as the poorest fourth, with Spain standing out as the most unequal and France as the least. The bivariate data thus seem to confirm the most pessimistic expectations outlined above. However, when the impact of income is contextualized together with other relevant sociodemographic, attitudinal, and behavioral independent

Table 10.5. Differences in Online Political Information, by Income Quartile

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	Multivariate (quartile)
Australia	24.7%	36.4%	38.5%	49.6%	(+)
France	16.3%	20.8%	23.9%	27.2%	(+)
Germany	14.1%	20.6%	28.3%	46.9%	(+)
Spain	4.1%	9.6%	16.8%	20.9%	(+)
United Kingdom	20.9%	33.8%	39.5%	56.3%	+
United States	27.4%	42.8%	53.6%	63.0%	+

Note: All bivariate relationships are significant at $p = .000$ (based on ANOVA F-tests). For the symbols reported in the last column, see table 10.1.

variables, as is done in the multivariate analyses, the coefficients for income remain positive but fail to reach the threshold of statistical significance in all countries but the United Kingdom and United States. In other words, in four out of six countries it is not income inequalities per se that drive the digital divide in political information. Rather, they are a reflection of the effects of other variables that predict citizens' propensity to engage with the campaign through the web.

The fact that the United States stands out, together with the United Kingdom, as the only country where the effects of income are not cancelled once the impact of other variables is controlled for highlights another aspect of American online exceptionalism.[5] The United Kingdom's inclusion in this particular category further corroborates one of the premises of this research endeavor—that taking English-speaking countries as reference points in digital politics may lead to misguided generalizations. The stronger impact of income on internet-based political information in the United States and United Kingdom is probably a reflection of their greater income inequalities compared to the others'. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), in the late 2000s the Gini coefficient—a standard measure of income inequalities, which varies from 0 (lowest) to 1 (highest)—in the United States and United Kingdom was, respectively, .378 and .345, against an average among OECD countries of .314. Australia, Spain, Germany, and France (in decreasing order) all featured lower inequalities as measured by the Gini coefficient, and accordingly in these countries income did not significantly affect internet political use. As noted, we could not fully test this hypothesis by including Italy, where income inequality is close to UK levels, with a Gini coefficient of .337 (OECD 2011b).

Furthermore, if we control for internet access in the three countries where a reliable measure is available (Australia, Germany, and the United States), the correlation remains nonsignificant in Germany, is attenuated and falls below the significance threshold in the United States, but, surprisingly, becomes *negative and statistically significant* in Australia. While the magnitude of the coefficient is small, it is a rather peculiar finding compared to most of what we know about the relationship between income and online politics. One possible explanation may lie in the fact that Australia enforces compulsory voting, one of whose effects is boosting participation among voters of low socioeconomic status (Norris 2004; Gallego 2010).[6] As a result of this particular institutional arrangement, poorer Australians are more likely to vote than their counterparts in the other countries under scrutiny here. Once they have cleared the hurdle of acquiring internet access, these citizens may find that the web is a more convenient source of information, as it allows to easily locate the campaign news content that is needed to cast a vote. Conversely, it does not seem to be an entire coincidence that the two countries in which income differences proved to significantly affect internet political use in multivariate models—the United States and United Kingdom—are also the two countries where turnout was lowest among those included in this study. To the extent that the US electorate overrepresents the middle class and underrepresents the lower class, citizens from poorer social strata, being less used to and interested in voting, may also be less motivated to get political information through the internet than similarly poor but more motivated and politically mobilized voters in countries where income-based inequalities in turnout are lower. While this hypothesis cannot be fully tested here because of the small number of countries involved, future research should probe whether institutional factors that increase turnout (e.g., compulsory voting and political culture) or decrease it (e.g., voter registration, majoritarian electoral laws, and vote on weekdays; see Blais 2007) also impact the magnitude and direction of the correlation between income and internet-based information and participation.

Political Inequalities and the Internet: An Appraisal

The empirical data have spelled some clear verdicts on the main socioeconomic determinants of political inequalities: while gender and education are

clearly for profound and democratically problematic inequalities in online political information, the impact of age can, by overrepresenting young voters online, "ameliorate the well-known participatory deficit among those who have just joined the electorate" (Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2010: 503). By contrast, income inequalities, while visible in simple bivariate analyses, cancel out in four out of six countries once other relevant casual factors are controlled for, suggesting that in most political systems class differences in and of themselves are not root causes of online inequality. The data justify a rather optimistic assessment of racial inequalities online, as ethnic minorities turned out to be even more likely than white majorities to access political information through the web. Finally, digital media's role in bridging or enlarging societal divides also depends on how institutions channel political demands by different groups, for instance, as regards socioeconomic inequalities in voter turnout.

These findings suggest three concluding observations.

First, many offline phenomena can go a long way toward explaining online patterns. The internet is not, for the most part, a space isolated from social and political realities. Digital politics differs from "politics as usual" in some respects, but at the same time "the distinction between being a citizen offline and being one online has started to dissolve," as noted by Andrew Chadwick (2006: 172). However, although the web is now deeply integrated into the everyday lives of millions of citizens in contemporary Western democracies, this aspect of digital politics is often neglected.

Second, far from disappearing or phasing out, the political digital divide is a lingering and worrisome presence in contemporary Western democracies, even when measured at the basic engagement level of paying attention to and getting information about politics through the internet. That these inequalities derive from gender, age, and education rather than income and ethnicity, however, suggests that, as a result of the increasing diffusion of basic internet technologies within contemporary societies, the political digital divide has more to do with skills and motivations than with simple access to the web.

Third, important differences in online political inequalities were found across countries, many of which set the United States apart from most other Western democracies in terms of the contours, magnitude, and causal drivers of participatory gaps. On the one hand, American women turned out to be as likely as men to get political information through the net. On the other hand and on a gloomier note, racial and economic differences affect online

campaign information in the United States (the latter also in the United Kingdom) more than in any other country included in this study. Another exception in our findings is the fact that, once internet access and other causal factors are controlled for, Australian low-income voters are more likely than their richer fellow citizens to get political information on the web. This pattern may result from the role of compulsory voting in motivating lower-class individuals with internet access to perform their civic duties not only as voters but also as informed citizens, and to turn to the web to do so.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Political Attitudes and Online Information

Political interest and motivations are among the most important determinants of citizens' engagement and participation in politics and civic life. As Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) suggest, "I don't want to" is one of the most common reasons why citizens opt out of the public sphere. In a discussion of the causal determinants of voter turnout, for instance, André Blais (2007: 633) concludes, "The decision to vote or not to vote hinges on many considerations but the two most important ones appear to be whether one is interested in politics or not and whether one feels that voting is a civic duty." Users' motivations are particularly important on the web because of the "selective" and "lean-forward" affordances of the internet, which arguably give users more leverage on the contents that are exchanged in the communication process than the mass media do. Another implication of online selectivity is that digital media may enable parties and candidates to "preach to the converted" and reinforce preexisting attitudes but not to reach broader audiences that are at least potentially open to attitude change. In order to investigate these issues, this chapter addresses the relationship between citizens' online information and their political motivations and preferences. I

focus specifically on the role of five types of political attitudes: interest in politics, sense of political efficacy, political trust, ideological orientation, and party identification.

Interest in Politics

Assessing the relationship between interest in politics and internet use for political information is the best way to ascertain whether online political communication is a channel that can solely attract voters who are already politically engaged or one that can also reach a broader, less politically committed audience. As table 11.1 shows, in all the seven countries included in this research, the most politically interested respondents were much more likely to rely on the internet for campaign news than the least interested in public affairs. Only in France (where the wording of the question for online political information was different from those asked in other countries) and in the United States—which once again emerges as a deviant case among the countries studied here—did substantial percentages among the least politically interested engage with politics through the web. In all the countries citizens who went online for political information expressed a higher interest in politics than those who did not rely on the internet for campaign news. On average, respondents who used the internet for political information were about 30% more interested in politics than those who did not, with peaks in Italy and Spain, the two countries where overall levels of internet political use were the lowest.[1] Finally, in five out of seven countries multivariate

Table 11.1. Differences in Online Political Information, by Interest in Politics

	Percentage That Went Online Among		Mean Interest (0–1)		
	Most Interested	Least Interested	Online Info	No Online Info	Multivariate
Australia	47.8%	0%	.78	.65	+
France	26.6%	13.9%	.62	.56	(+)
Germany	49.0%	2.2%	.56	.40	(+)
Italy	40.1%	3.1%	.59	.36	+
Spain	23.6%	2.9%	.66	.47	+
United Kingdom	46.1%	6.3%	.63	.49	+
United States	57.6%	24.8%	.61	.50	+

Note: For the symbols reported in the last column, see table 10.1.

models showed that interest in politics was positively and significantly correlated with use of the web for campaign news, the two exceptions being France and Germany.

Both the bivariate and multivariate analyses thus confirm that online political information is predominantly the purview of those citizens who are already interested in politics. This finding is intuitive for at least two reasons. First, political interest also predicts most types of political engagement and participation, including attention to the news (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954), and online information should be no exception. Second, the great amount of sources and contents available on the internet makes it easy for citizens who are not interested in politics to avoid it altogether (Prior 2007), as shown by the low percentages of online political information among the least interested respondents in all countries but the United States. The selective affordances of digital media invite citizens to choose which types of contents to encounter and which ones to avoid, which for many individuals results in a blackout rather than a deluge of political information online.

Another, perhaps more interesting question to be asked, however, is whether the internet is *more or less* selective than the other mass media through which citizens acquire, or encounter, political information. Figure 11.1 answers this question by showing, for each country, the mean values of interest in politics (ranging from 0 to 1) among those citizens who reported using the internet, newspapers, and television, respectively, to gather political information. In most countries, people who go online for political information are more interested in politics than those who rely on newspapers and, especially, television news. Thus, the audience for political information on the web is not only more engaged with civic life than the average voter is but also more interested in public affairs than consumers of political news via the mass media. Some qualifications, however, need to be made.

First, apart from those who chose television as one of their two main sources of information in France,[2] consumers of political information on *all* media, both analog and digital, turned out to be more interested in politics than the whole populations in their countries are. Though not surprising, this result should caution us against the risk of overinterpreting positive associations between political interest and internet use. While such correlations are certainly real, strong, and consequential, they are not specific to the internet but affect usage patterns of all the most common mass channels of political information. In other words, that political interest predicts the acquisition

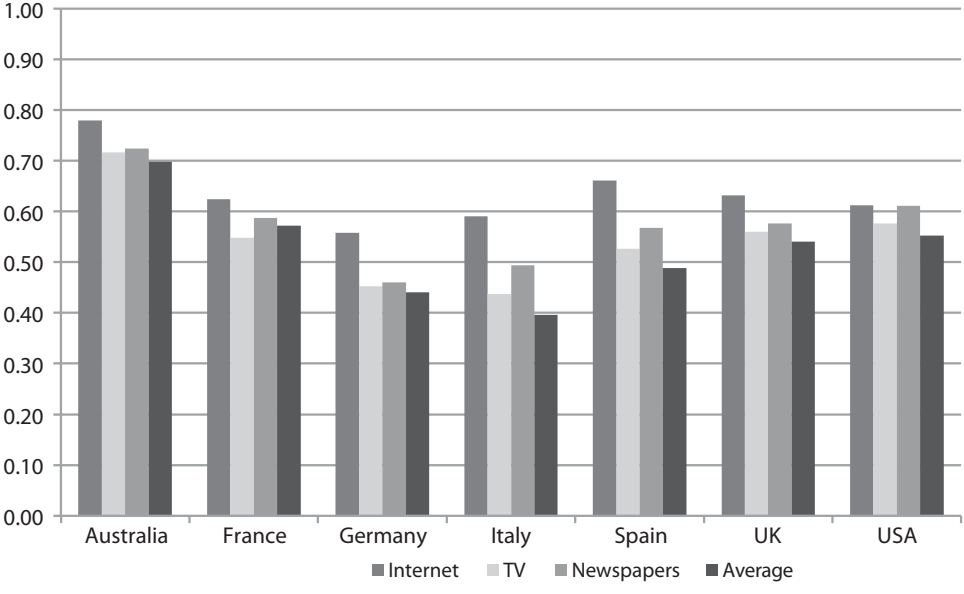

Figure 11.1. Average interest in politics (0–1) among citizens who used the internet, newspapers, and television to get political or campaign information.

of political information through the media is true for television and newspapers just as it is for the internet. The differences in the use of these channels have to do with the strength rather than the direction of the correlations.

Second, those who rely on the internet for campaign news are much more interested in politics than television news watchers, but the gap with newspaper readers tends to be smaller. This finding is consistent with consolidated evidence that television news is easier to process and better suited for capturing the attention of low-interest voters than newspapers (Neuman, Just, and Crigler 1992; Graber 2001) and validates Bimber and Davis's (2003: 183) insight that, as a political communication channel, the internet resembles the press more than television.

Third, the gap in political interest between the internet audience and the rest of the population is largest in those countries—Italy and Spain—where voters who went online for campaign information were the fewest. In other words, politically interested citizens are early adopters of the internet as a source of political information, but as the web becomes a more popular political channel, its audience becomes more representative of the rest of the pop-

ulation, that is, less politically involved. The most apparent demonstration of this development is the United States, where average political interest among those who relied on the internet for campaign information is identical to that among those who read newspapers and remarkably similar to television news watchers as well. Thus, once again, the United States turns out to be a rather exceptional case in our sample of countries. Other countries may follow suit if and when the internet rises to a comparable level of prominence in citizens' informational diets. The gaps in political interest between consumers of political information on the web and through the mass media are smaller in the United Kingdom and Australia—the two countries that come after the United States in terms of political internet use among citizens—than in the remaining four countries, where fewer citizens relied on the web for campaign news.

We can gain further insights on this issue by comparing the situation in the two, remarkably different countries for which we can analyze citizen behavior across two national campaigns: Australia and Italy. In the 2007 Australian general election, average interest in politics among those who went online for campaign information was .82, and in 2010 it declined to .78; similarly, in the 2006 Italian general election, those who got political news through the internet had a mean level of interest in politics of .65, which shrank to .59 in 2008. Thus, in both countries the typical consumer of web-based political news became less eccentric in terms of political interest compared to the rest of the population.[3] The same was found in multivariate models, where the strength of the coefficients for political interest decreased in both countries from one election to the other.

The data show that, as the internet becomes integrated with the everyday lives of large parts of the population, it should become less of a niche channel for the politically interested and more similar, in terms of the level of engagement of its audience, to other mass media. The integration of digital media with other channels of communication (both mediated and interpersonal) is blending these different systems of message production and distribution. To capture these developments, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel (1999) have proposed the concept of a "mixed media system," and Andrew Chadwick (2013) has theorized the "hybrid media system" as a new configuration where the boundaries between different media technologies and environments, as well as those between content production and reception, are constantly blurred

and redefined by audiences as well as media organizations. Chapter 12 sheds further light on these issues by analyzing the relationship between political information through the internet and mass media use, as well as the role of interpersonal discussion.

Political Efficacy and Trust

The concept of political efficacy allows us to further delve into citizens' motivations to engage with public affairs online. Individuals may be interested in politics, but if they do not believe that they have any realistic possibility to affect political decisions and the selection of decision makers, they may rationally decide to abstain from participating in political activities, or they may prefer unorthodox endeavors such as protest. To measure these attitudes, Easton and Dennis (1967) introduced the concept of political efficacy, which entails citizens' confidence in their power to affect the conducts and choices of public officials. Political efficacy can be conceptualized as having an internal dimension, which involves citizens' representations of their own political capabilities, and an external one, which reflects their evaluations of how political institutions and authorities respond to their preferences (Converse 1972). Empirical research has consistently found both internal and external political efficacy to be strong predictors of political participation (Millbrath and Goel 1965; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; for a recent overview of the role of digital media in fostering political efficacy, see Coleman, Morrison, and Svennevig 2008). A related notion is that of political trust, which has to do with "the belief that others will not deliberately or knowingly do us harm, if they can avoid it, and look after our interests, if this is possible" (Newton 2007: 343), and can be applied to both other people surrounding us and—which is relevant here—political elites and institutions. Like political efficacy, political trust has also been found to affect various types of individual-level participation as well as aggregate-level measures of the functioning of democracy (Newton 2007: 352–355).

The relationship between political efficacy and trust and online political information can be better understood through Albert Hirschmann's (1970) conceptualization of the three ways in which citizens can react to declines and crises of confidence in large organizations. People can *exit* these organizations, severing their formal and informal ties with them; they can *voice* their grievances, thus maintaining links with the declining organizations and offer-

ing them opportunities to identify and possibly solve problems; or they can overcome the crisis and maintain their *loyalty* toward the organizations.

Given the crisis of confidence that is affecting contemporary Western democracies (Dalton 2004) and, especially, institutional political actors such as parties (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000), digital media can attract different types of citizens according to their prevalent responses to such crisis. If, on the one hand, the audience for online politics felt a greater sense of efficacy and political trust than the rest of the population, we could conclude that the internet caters mostly to citizens who are both engaged with and supportive of the political system—in the sense of diffuse support for its principles and rules (Easton 1965)—thus mostly channeling citizens' loyalty toward it. If, on the other hand, we found that those who rely on the internet for information on public affairs tend to feel less efficacious or to be less confident in the main actors and institutions of politics than the rest of the population, then the implication would be that digital media mostly afford opportunities for "critical" citizens (Norris 1999) to voice their discontent, to the extent that they address political authorities, or even to exit the system by supporting extra-institutional or anti-institutional actors, groups, and movements. Exit, voice, and loyalty are not mutually exclusive outcomes within the same population, as they can appeal to different sectors of the electorate in a country, but the relative weight that each type of reaction has in the online public sphere may vary substantially in countries with different political institutions and cultures.

Table 11.2 compares the seven countries included in this study by the average levels of political efficacy[4] and political trust[5] of the survey respondents who did and did not go online for political information during the last general election. As with political interest, the values of these two variables have been normalized, so that in each country they range between 0 (lowest efficacy and trust) and 1 (highest efficacy and trust). Unlike most variables that we have analyzed so far, political attitudes of efficacy and trust have different impacts on web-based political information from country to country. The results of both bivariate and multivariate analyses suggest that at least two groups of countries can be identified.

First, in France and, less evidently, Spain, choice and use of the internet for political information are mostly associated with negative attitudes toward politics and low confidence in one's ability to influence it. In France, this pattern emerges from both the bivariate analysis (where those who chose the

Table 11.2. Relationship between Online Political Information, Political Efficacy, and Political Trust

	Mean Political Efficacy (0–1)		Mean Political Trust (0–1)		Multivariate	
	Online Information	No Online Information	Online Information	No Online Information	Efficacy	Trust
Australia	.50	.43	.38	.35	+	(+)
France	.25	.28	.30	.36	–	(–)
Germany	.55	.40	//	//	+	//
Italy	.40	.29	.35	.29	(+)	(+)
Spain	.54	.41	.48	.45	+	–
United Kingdom	.38	.30	.45	.38	(+)	+
United States	.55	.48	.46	.47	+	(–)

Note: For the symbols reported in the last two columns, see table 10.1.

web as one of their main two channels for campaign news felt less politically efficacious and were less trusting of parties than those who did not do so) and the multivariate one (where both coefficients are negative and the one for efficacy is also significant). In Spain, the correlation was positive for political efficacy, but negative and significant at the multivariate level for political trust. In both these countries, political parties have generally been regarded with suspicion as a result of political history: in France, mainstream political culture has always valued an organic vision of the state and distrusted organizations that represent parts of society (Ignazi 1996; Knapp 2002); in Spain, the elite-led democratic consolidation in the 1970s after the fall of the authoritarian regime of Francisco Franco (Morlino 1995) produced "synthetic" parties, "in the sense that they are supported more from above than below" (Halliday 2002: 248). Political elites turned to parties as necessary organizational channels to restore democracy, but citizens never identified with them on a mass scale.

Thus, in France and Spain the internet is mostly an important vehicle for disaffected and critical citizens to voice their views, which often challenge those of dominant authorities and question established institutions. Consider, for instance, the important role that digital media played in the protests that took place on 11 March 2004 against the Spanish government's attempt to blame Basque terrorists for the Al-Qaeda-engineered train bombings in Madrid (Sampedro 2005), and the role of the internet in voicing opposition to the European Constitution in the French referendum of 2005, which,

though supported by most parties and elite politicians, was rejected by citizens at the ballot box (Greffet 2005). The elective affinity between digital media and political dissent in Spain was also confirmed by the fact that the internet played a significant role in the 2011 uprisings by the *indignados* movement, which protested against fiscal austerity and challenged the legitimacy of the two-party system that has ruled the country for decades. Studies have found that those who took part in such protests were less politically interested and engaged and less likely to have been involved in previous demonstrations than average voters and that these citizens were for a large part mobilized by informal calls for action, often channeled by digital media. Thus, rather than simply reinforcing existing patterns of political participation, the web seems to have contributed to mobilizing a new breed of protesters that had little prior interest and engagement in politics (Anduiza, Cristancho, and Sabucedo 2011).

A second group of countries includes the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany (for which, however, we have no data on political trust), and the United States (where the multivariate correlation with political efficacy is positive and significant, whereas that with political trust is negative but not significant). In these countries, while the strength of the relationships varies at both bivariate and multivariate levels, all signs point to the opposite direction compared to France and Spain: that is, it is mostly citizens who feel politically efficacious and who trust parties and governments—in other words, whose main attitude toward the political system is loyalty—that tend to go online for political information. The relationships are not as strong as they turned out to be with respect to political interest, but in each country positive and significant coefficients were found in the multivariate analysis for at least one of the two independent variables. The United States differs slightly from the other three countries in this group because American citizens who use the internet for political information tend to feel significantly more efficacious than those who do not rely on the web for campaign news, but the same tendency does not emerge with respect to political trust (measured as trust in government), which shows a mild, statistically not significant, negative correlation with online political information in both bivariate and multivariate analyses. This finding is not entirely surprising if one considers the vast body of literature that has highlighted American citizens' declining civic and political participation (Bennett 1998; Putnam 2000), low levels of political

information (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), lack of trust in government (Segal 2003), and preferences for low-intensity forms of political engagement (Hibbing and Thesis-Morse 2002) and communication (Lipsitz et al. 2005). The United States thus tilts more toward the "loyalty" than the "voice" group, but its digital politics may also be hospitable to politically disaffected citizens, as may have partially been the case with the online success enjoyed by the Tea Party movement (Skocpol and Williamson 2012).

Finally, Italy stands somewhat in between these two groups, as the multivariate analysis found that neither political efficacy nor political trust have a significant effect on citizens' use of the internet to acquire political information (although the coefficients are positive). That Italians who engage in online politics are not particularly supportive of their political system and authorities is not surprising in light of the fact that parties have for a long time enjoyed low levels of trust there (Bardi 2002; Morlino and Tarchi 2006) and that social capital and civic engagement have often been found wanting among large swaths of the population (Putnam 1993; Pasquino 2002). However, Italy differs from France and Spain because, unlike them, for about thirty years (since the restoration of democracy after World War II until the upheavals of the 1970s) it did experience an era of strong party organizations that were highly legitimized among the electorate, although they declined dramatically from the 1980s onward (Cotta and Verzichelli 2007: chap. 2). This historical legacy may contribute to explaining why the audiences for internet politics in Italy, while not being fully supportive of the political system, are less disenchanted and disengaged than those in Spain and France. The recent history of internet politics in the country seems to confirm this ambiguous position. On the one hand, the web has been successfully employed by local civic groups to campaign in defense of public goods in the national referendum of 2011 (when voters rejected the government's plans to restore nuclear energy production, to privatize the supply of water, and to grant judiciary immunity to five institutional figures). On the other hand, digital media have also been the breeding ground of the Five Star Movement, an electoral organization created by comedian Beppe Grillo that, while articulating substantive discussion on various policy issues, has also championed antipolitical themes and populist imagery, heavily criticizing all parties and calling for an overhaul of representative institutions in favor of electronic direct democracy (Vaccari 2009; Navarria 2009; Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013).

Political Preferences

The relationship between online political engagement and political preferences may have momentous implications for party competition. Parties and candidates of the moderate left appear generally to produce richer websites than those of the moderate right and of radical parties across the aisle, whereas incumbency turned out to play a marginal role at best (see chapter 7). While various explanations have been offered for this finding, it is an empirical reality that characterizes political communication within the temporal and geographic limits of this study and that may, if maintained, result in important competitive advantages for some political actors over others. Can a similar situation be found on the demand side, that is, with respect to the political preferences of voters who rely on the internet for campaign news?

As with the supply side, there are three possible causal drivers to be evaluated: incumbency; ideology; and, within ideology, radicalism. With respect to incumbency, supporters of out-of-power parties may be more eager to go online to engage in politics because they may see their favored parties portrayed less frequently or favorably in the mass media; moreover, they may have a greater desire to do something to help their parties get into, or at least closer to, power. As for ideology, citizens' likelihood to use the web for political information may depend on their party preferences and positioning on the policy space, so that supporters of particular positions and persuasions may be overrepresented within the online public, resulting in greater potential web audiences and "boots on the online ground" for the parties and candidates these voters identify with. As regards radicalism, the internet may offer a promising environment for supporters of extremist viewpoints and organizations by allowing radical voters to more freely cultivate each other's convictions, get political information consistent with their views (which often fall outside the domain of what the mass media consider politically appropriate or newsworthy), and find engagement opportunities to promote their causes.

To test these hypotheses, we need valid and reliable measures of citizens' party and political preferences in each of the seven countries. Research on voting behavior has generally employed two types of variables: *party identification*, which is based on questions asking voters if they identify with, or feel closer to, or consider themselves to be part of a particular party (Holmberg 2007), and *ideology*, which is based on questions through which voters anchor

themselves on a one-dimensional representation of the political spectrum, either left-right or, particularly in the United States, liberal-conservative (Mair 2007). Both concepts measure important aspects of individuals' medium-term political predispositions and have been widely used in studies of political and, particularly, electoral behavior. However, while party identification has consistently been a cornerstone of voting research in countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, its use has been less successful in continental Europe. In France, for instance, studies have shown that ideology predicts voting behavior better than party identification (Fleury and Lewis-Beck 1993). In Spain, the concept of party identification is not particularly meaningful because most voters have weak attachments to parties, as reflected in high levels of electoral volatility (Montero 1998). A sign of this detachment is the fact that, in the 2008 electoral survey, as many as 47% of respondents refused to name any party that they identify with, as opposed to only 14% that could not locate themselves on the left-right space. In Italy, party identification is problematic given that the party system has been fluid over the past two decades, first with the disappearance of all the relevant parties that had contested elections between 1946 and 1992, then with constant changes, mergers, and splits among the new parties that had formed as a result of the demise of their predecessors. Thus, it has been difficult for voters to stably anchor their policy views to a particular party, and alternative identifications with coalitions or political "areas" have been developed (for more detailed considerations on these issues, see Campus, Pasquino, and Vaccari 2008: 430–432). While I rely on both party identification and ideology to assess the relationship between individuals' political preferences and their propensity to get their information through the internet, these measures are not equally useful in each country.

Going back to the three questions introduced earlier—incumbency, ideology, and radicalism—let us start by testing whether supporters of parties in government are less likely than those of parties in opposition to rely on the internet for electoral information. The best way to do so is to compare the online behavior of voters who identify with the two major parties that compete for government (or, in multiparty systems, for the leadership in governmental coalitions) in each country, which can all be broadly classified as belonging to either the progressive or the conservative families (see chapter 7 for considerations on party classification). Figure 11.2 shows the percentages of identifiers with these parties that used the internet for campaign news in

the general elections covered in this study. Like the analysis of party and candidate websites, the longitudinal nature of some of our data allows us to better test the incumbency hypothesis because in Australia and Italy we can look at two different general elections in which the roles of incumbent and challenger were switched between 2007 and 2010 (Australia) and between 2006 and 2008 (Italy). By contrast, we are not able to test this hypothesis for the German case because in 2009 the two main parties that contested the election had governed together for four years in a grand coalition and, thus, could both be considered as incumbents.

The bivariate analysis provides little evidence for the incumbency hypothesis. Only in three out of eight elections presented in the figure did supporters of the challenger party rely on the internet noticeably more than those of

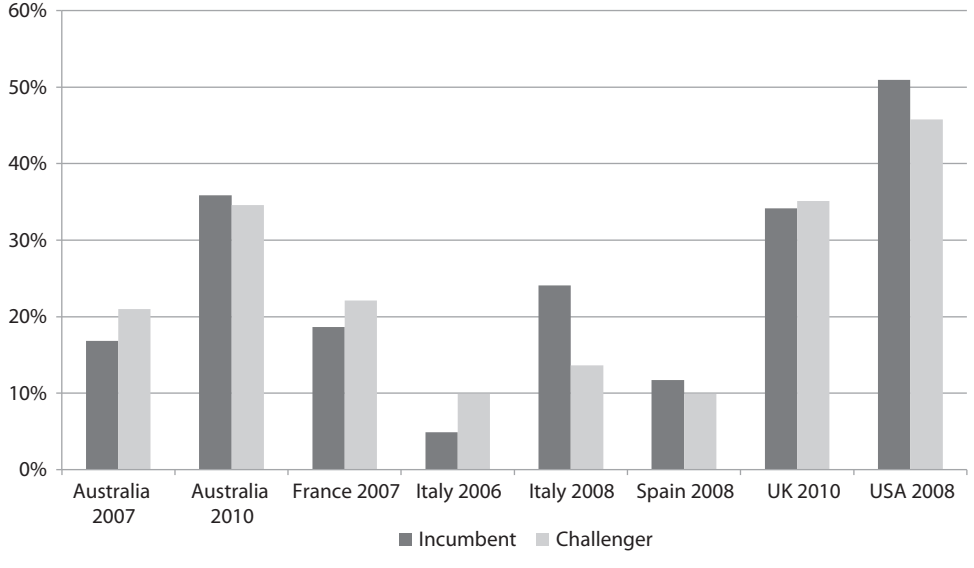

Figure 11.2. Percentages of identifiers with the main incumbent and challenger parties who used the internet for political information. *Note:* Parties included in the comparison are (challengers first): Australian Labor Party, Liberal Party (Australia 2007); Liberal Party, Australian Labor Party (Australia 2010); Parti Socialiste, Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (France 2007); Democratici di Sinistra, Forza Italia (Italy 2006); Popolo della Libertà, Partito Democratico (Italy 2008); Partido Popular, Partido Socialista Obrero Esapanol (Spain 2008); Conservatives, Labour Party (United Kingdom 2010); Democratic Party, Republican Party (United States 2008). Germany was not included because CDU and SPD were governing together in a grand coalition in the run-up to the 2009 general elections.

the incumbent party: Australia in 2007, France in 2007, and Italy in 2006.[6] By contrast, in the 2010 Australian and UK general elections no statistically significant difference was found between those who identified with the main governing and opposition parties. On the other hand, in the 2008 Italian, Spanish, and US elections, voters who portrayed themselves as closer to the main incumbent parties were generally *more* rather than less likely than supporters of the biggest challenger parties to rely on the web for campaign news.[7] The fact that US Republican voters in 2008 were, according to the bivariate analysis, more likely than Democrats to use the internet for political information is particularly relevant in light of the fact that theories of challenger online superiority were mostly born out of analyses of the American case (Kerbel 2009; Karpf 2012). It is also somewhat surprising given the dynamics of the 2008 campaign, which was characterized by Obama's path-breaking online initiatives (also documented by the website analysis in part II).

Whereas incumbency seems to affect online information in different ways in different countries, longitudinal comparisons in Australia and Italy reveal that, rather than incumbency, identification with left-wing main parties seems to be a more powerful predictor of web-based campaign information. Supporters of the Australian Labor Party were heavier users of online political news than those of the Liberal Party through thick and thin, that is, both when their party was in opposition (2007) and when it was in government (2010), even though in the latter case the difference was not statistically significant. In Italy the situation is even clearer, as identifiers with the main left-wing party (the Democrats of the Left in 2006, which in 2008 contributed to founding the Democratic Party) were consistently and significantly more likely to rely on the internet for campaign news than the main right-wing party (Forza Italia in 2006, which then merged into the People of Freedom in 2008) in both 2006, when the center-right coalition led by media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi had been in government for five years, and 2008, when a center-left coalition had governed for the previous two years before its razor-thin parliamentary majority collapsed and early elections had to be called.

The Italian situation may be anomalous because one coalition, Berlusconi's center-right, constantly dominated political communication over almost two decades, not only because of its leader's ownership of the main commercial television conglomerate (Hine 2002) but also owing to superior mastering of political marketing and news management techniques (Grandi and

Vaccari 2009). It is thus conceivable that Italian progressive voters may have relied on the internet more intensely than conservative ones as a coping strategy to deal with mass media coverage that was often unfavorable to the parties and stances they supported and as a practical way to find opportunities to challenge Berlusconi's dominance of political information on television (Vaccari 2011; 2012).

Thus, the Italian case suggests that electoral incentives may result from different situations in different countries. In some cases, it may be the sheer lack of government control resulting from an electoral defeat that motivates supporters of particular parties to engage in politics online, as suggested by Karpf (2012). In others, however, contextual conditions such as a more or less permanent competitive disadvantage in the main channels of political communication may be a stronger driver than a party's electoral and governing fortunes. That being said, the data shown so far provide little support to the notion that incumbency per se affects the political structure of online audiences in any systematic way, thus mirroring my findings for political websites.

Since leftist party preferences have emerged as a potentially more relevant factor than incumbency, let us now further pursue this route by looking beyond the conservative and progressive party families. By examining the relationship between voters' party preferences and their likelihood of getting political information on the internet, we can also better assess the role of political extremism in fostering or hindering engagement with internet politics. To this end, table 11.3 shows the percentages of voters who identify with the main parties that went online for campaign news during each general election included in this study. The evidence on party identification shows various intriguing trends. A first broad tendency is that in all countries except the United States[8] supporters of at least one minor party were found to be more eager to rely on the internet for political information than those of both major parties. This finding confirms that the web can serve as a useful channel for voters of political actors that are less than central in their party systems and that, as a result, tend to receive less attention in the mass media. Which types of parties and which types of ideological positions these voters adhere to varies from country to country, but the potential clearly exists for minor party supporters to find viable informational alternatives online.

A case in point involves voters who identify with green parties. In Australia, Germany, and Italy, green party supporters are more likely to rely on the

Table 11.3. Main Parties' Identifiers Who Went Online for Political Information

	Major Parties		Minor Parties			
	Progressive	Conservative	Centrist / Liberal	Green	Radical Right	Radical Left
Australia 2007	21.0%	16.8%	—	42.4%	—	—
Australia 2010	35.9%	34.6%	—	53.8%	—	—
France 2007	22.1%	18.6%	27.9%	22.3%	20.4%	20.3%
Germany 2009	26.3%	26.4%	42.8%	47.7%	—	31.1%
Italy 2006	9.9%	4.9%	1.4%	17.9%	8.3%	17.1%
Italy 2008	24.1%	13.6%	18.5%	27.7%	15.2%	28.8%
Spain 2008	11.7%	9.9%	—	—	—	22.3%
United Kingdom 2010	34.2%	35.1%	48.7%	30.1%	28.2%	—
United States 2008	45.8%	50.9%	(Independents 27.2%)			

internet for political information than those who identify with any other parties, both major and minor. Previous studies have noted that green party elites and their voters tend to be particularly at ease with online communication owing to their ideology, internal organization, and sociodemographic profiles (see chapter 3). Consistently, in part II we have seen that green parties and candidates offer more features on their websites than most other political actors, particularly when relevant factors such as resources and organizational arrangements are controlled for. That being said, this pattern could not be found in the United Kingdom and was rather muted in France, whereas in Spain and the United States no reliable measurement of identification with the greens was available, not least because of the limited relevance of this party family in such political systems.

Supporters of centrist or liberal parties in three European countries—the Free Democratic Party (FDP) in Germany, Liberal-Democrats in the United Kingdom, and UDF/Mouvement Démocrate in France—were more likely to rely on the internet than either major party in their respective countries. What these three parties have in common is that their competitive strategies aimed to erode the support of the major parties by presenting themselves as viable governing alternatives. The German FDP heavily criticized the grand coalition between the Christian-Democrats and Socialists that had run the country for the previous four years; the British Liberal-Democrats cast themselves as the only agents of change from the governmental dominance of the Conservative and Labour parties over the previous decades; finally, the French

UDF/Mouvement Démocrate aimed to build a new centrist *rassemblement* around its presidential candidate, François Bayrou, who for some time polled second in the race.[9] Although these organizations can count on a relatively large base of supporters, they tend to be less visible in the mass media than the major parties whose leaders are poised to become heads of government if elected. Voters of parties trying to alter the current coalitional equilibrium may view the internet as a viable alternative not only to get news about their favored parties and candidates but also to distribute messages about them that can help bypass the filter of other information gatekeepers.

A third set of findings has to do with the radicalism hypothesis, and here, too, results are mixed. In Germany, Italy, and Spain, supporters of radical left-wing parties were more likely than average to rely on the internet for campaign news, which benefited the Linke in Germany, the various postcommunist parties and cartels that existed in Italy between 2006 and 2008, and Izquierda Unida in Spain. It is worth noting that some of these parties offered relatively strong performances on the supply side as well, maintaining institutional websites that, at least in some elections, were quantitatively comparable or close to those of their major competitors.[10] Whereas no similar parties are relevant enough in Australia and the United States to allow reliable measurements of identification with them, in France and the United Kingdom supporters of radical parties both left and right were not particularly eager to engage with online information. Once again, this finding confirms those of the website analysis[11] and is particularly relevant given the high profile that radical right-wing parties such as the Front national in France and the British National Party in the United Kingdom have maintained over the past few years. Radicalism seems to drive online audiences only in some countries—perhaps not coincidentally, those that employ proportional electoral systems, which allow those parties more opportunities to gain seats and influence—and more on the left than the right.

The data I have shown so far only describe the partisan composition of online audiences and do not take into account citizens' ideological predispositions—which, as we saw earlier, are often a more reliable indicator of their political preferences—as well as the other variables that can affect the use of the internet for political information. To more fully assess the causal impact of political preferences, I provide information about the direction of the relevant coefficients that turned out to be statistically significant in the multivariate analyses (whose full results are shown in the appendix). It should

be noted that the reference category for party identification was the main Christian-democrat or conservative party in each country, so any finding related to party identification should be interpreted as involving the difference between those identifying with the main conservative party and those feeling close to one of the other parties.

- In Australia, party identification was not significant in both the 2007 and 2010 electoral surveys; ideology was significant in 2007, with voters closer to the left more likely to rely on the internet than those to the right, but not in 2010.
- In France, neither party identification nor ideology had a significant predictive power.
- In Germany, voters identifying with parties outside of parliament were more likely to rely on the internet for campaign news, while ideology played no significant role.
- In Italy, ideology significantly affected online information in both the 2006 and 2008 elections, with voters closer to the left more likely to rely on the web than those closer to the right. In 2006 identification with the centrist UDC was negatively correlated with online information, whereas in 2008 identification with parties outside the main coalitions was positively correlated with web-based campaign news.
- In Spain, identification with the Socialist Party and lack of identification with any party were both positively correlated with online information, whereas ideology played no significant role.
- In the United Kingdom, identification with the Liberal-Democrats was positively and significantly correlated with online information; no measure of ideology was available.
- In the United States, ideologically liberal voters were significantly more likely than conservatives to rely on the internet for political news, whereas party identification had no significant effect.

Multivariate analyses, thus, reveal patterns that help clarify the findings from bivariate analyses. First, in no country were statistically significant correlations found that suggest a systematic overrepresentation of right-wing or conservative voters, so that, if online political audiences tend to tilt toward one end of the political spectrum, it does not seem to be to the right. Second,

in some countries the supporters of challenger parties—or of the ideological viewpoints that they broadly represent—were found to be more active online than those of the incumbents. For instance, in the United States, even if Republicans were slightly more likely than Democrats to rely on the web for political contents (51% to 46%; see table 11.3), party identification had no significant effect in the multivariate analysis, which, instead, revealed that those who locate themselves closer to the liberal ideological pole tend to engage with online politics significantly more than those that call themselves conservative. This finding confirms earlier research (e.g., Hindman 2005) claiming that US liberals tend to be more engaged online than conservatives, as well as lending support to portrayals of a more vibrant progressive online community (Kerbel 2009; Karpf 2012; see part I). A similar situation was found in the 2007 Australian elections when, after an eleven-year-long tenure in government by conservative leader John Howard, left-wing voters engaged online more than those who located themselves toward the right. In the 2006 Italian elections, after a Berlusconi-led center-right government had been in place for five consecutive years, progressive voters were more eager to rely on the internet than conservatives. To some degree, this category may also include the UK Liberal-Democrats, an opposition party that suddenly turned into a credible governmental challenger in 2010 and whose voters were strong users of digital media.

However, in at least two other cases—the 2008 Italian and Spanish elections—supporters of progressive parties or ideologies (specifically, ideologically leftists in Italy and identifiers with the Socialist Party in Spain) were more active online than conservatives even though left-wing parties were incumbent in national governments.

Another pattern that emerged in various countries is that supporters of minor—but not necessarily radical—parties and viewpoints were more likely than most others to engage in politics online. Such was the case in Germany (with the "other parties" grouping not including the left-wing party Die Linke), Italy (in 2008), and Spain (where this phenomenon involved those who distanced themselves from all parties). Finally, in France as well as in the 2010 Australian elections, no significant correlations were found at the multivariate level, but the bivariate analyses shown above (see table 11.3) suggest that supporters of some parties (Greens in Australia and UDF voters in France) outside the two-way competition among the major parties were more likely than the rest of the population to engage with the campaign online.

Overall, these patterns suggest that the competition for online political audiences does not necessarily favor dominant forces, as some proponents of dystopian visions of the internet suggest. The audiences for online politics were found to disproportionally include supporters of some minor parties (in Germany and Italy, as well as in Australia with respect to Greens) and of certain middle-sized parties that try to insert themselves within the competition between the two major parties (in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom). Thus, in most countries included in this study, supporters of parties other than the two main forces that compete for (both single-party and coalitional) governmental leadership tend to rely on the internet for political information more heavily than the rest of the electorate. The web seems to meet the demands and expectations of citizens who identify with (at least some) small and medium-sized parties or even, as in Spain, of people who do not support any particular party. Thus, by catering to groups that may not be entirely satisfied by institutional campaign news as provided by the mass media and by the parties themselves, digital media enrich the diversity of national public spheres and broaden the political composition of the audiences for political news.

Only in the United States did we find no sign of such tendency, which once again sets this country apart from the others included in this study. The reasons for this null US finding may be threefold and could involve political institutions, political context, and survey measurements. First, one of the reasons why the two-party system is so firmly ingrained in US politics is that various institutional arrangements are in place that make it difficult for third parties to effectively contest elections. These obstacles include electoral laws (with practically no exceptions to the first-past-the-post rule, as opposed to, for instance, the United Kingdom, where proportional rules are used in elections for the European parliament and the regional parliaments of Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland), the electoral college mechanism in presidential races, ballot access rules, the high costs of electioneering, and campaign finance regulations, particularly the lack of public funding save for presidential elections (Rosenstone, Behr, and Lazarus 1996). Second, despite all these hurdles, occasionally some high-profile candidates from outside the Republican and Democratic parties emerge that manage to be elected (such as former wrestler Jesse Ventura, who successfully ran for Minnesota governor with the Reform Party in 1998) or to significantly affect the two-party competition

(such as Reform Party candidate Ross Perot, who gained 18.9% and 8.4% of the popular vote in the 1992 and 1996 presidential elections, respectively and, to a more limited degree, Green Party candidate Ralph Nader, who garnered 2.7% of the popular vote in 2000). However, this was not the case in 2008, when the combined votes of the two main third-party contenders, Libertarian Party's standard-bearer Bob Barr and Nader himself (this time running as an Independent), failed to total more than 1% of the popular vote. Thus, the 2008 campaign was not a favorable environment for candidates outside the two main parties, also as a result of the novelties of a woman and an African American contending the Democratic nomination and of a woman on the Republican ticket.[12] However, even if a relevant third-party candidate had materialized, the standard question measuring party identification in the American National Election Studies simply asks voters if they think of themselves as Republicans, Democrats, or Independents, thus leaving no room for attachments to other parties. This limitation could make it hard to detect such phenomena even in favorable electoral contexts.

That being said, the comparative evidence shown here suggests that the US-inspired theory of normalization (Margolis and Resnick 2000), which claims that minor parties are bound to be disadvantaged online as they are offline, does not necessarily apply to the demand side for all parties in all Western political systems. To the contrary, supporters of some minor parties disproportionally rely on the internet for political information, so that the web counterbalances at least three offline sources of electoral disadvantage for marginal organizations. First, the mass media tend to devote most of their coverage to the major parties (Strömbäck and Kaid 2008). Second, major parties usually have the most resources and can thus amass campaigns of higher intensity than minor parties. Third, as Rutger Schmitt-Beck (2003: 258) has found, interpersonal communication "functions as a conservative force in electoral competition, in the sense of contributing to the asymmetric status quo regarding the distribution of popular support for majority and minority parties or candidates." When they talk about politics with other people, followers of minor parties are less likely to find widespread group support for their positions than those of major parties. From the perspective of citizens, digital media thus seem to be reducing, rather than mirroring or reinforcing, inequalities in political information resulting from all other layers of political communication, whether owned, paid, earned, or social.

With respect to political competition, no universal pattern was found across all seven countries, but two broad conclusions can still be drawn. First, out-of-power major parties do not seem to be uniformly benefiting from the internet, as their supporters were not always more likely to engage with politics online than those of incumbents. Partial demand-side evidence for the theory of outparty innovation incentives was found in the United States and, in a narrower sense, in Australia and the United Kingdom.[13] Not coincidentally, these countries all employ majoritarian electoral systems and "visions" of democracy (Powell 2000), in which elections establish clear government mandates and out-of-power parties have only one viable way to achieve political power and policy-making clout: winning electoral majorities. These arrangements produce strong incentives for politicians in the opposition and their supporters to aggressively pursue any available communication channel that could help increase their vote tallies. Even in these countries, however, the demand-side evidence for the outparty innovation incentives theory is limited, and scant support was found in France, which also employs a majoritarian, albeit majority rather than plurality, electoral system.[14] Thus, just as we found for party and candidate websites, the patterns of alternation between government and opposition among major political actors do not universally influence their supporters' motivations to seek information online and the resulting size of their potential online armies of volunteers, financial contributors, recruiters, and message multipliers.

A second conclusion related to political competition is that, to the extent that the online audience for political information does not uniformly mirror the partisan and ideological preferences of the electorate as a whole, it is more likely to tilt leftward than rightward. This pattern emerged in multivariate analyses with respect to ideology (in Australia, Italy, and the United States) and party identification (in Spain and, partially, the United Kingdom, to the extent that most supporters of the Liberal-Democrats are closer to the left than the right), as well as in bivariate analyses with respect to French Socialists and German Greens (which over the past two decades have consistently formed center-left coalitions with the Social Democrats when political conditions allowed for them). By contrast, no comparable reverse pattern was found, that is, supporters of conservative parties or voters placing themselves closer to the right ideological pole have not been clearly overrepresented within the politically engaged online public in any of the general elections between 2006

and 2010 in the seven Western democracies studied here. This finding on the demand side of internet politics, too, confirms those on the supply side, where progressive parties' and candidates' websites were found to generally offer more features than those of their conservative counterparts (see chapters 7 and 8). So far, the left rather than the right seems to have enjoyed a relative advantage in online political competition.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Political Engagement, Mass Media Use, and Online Information

In looking at online political information as a first step in the ladder of political engagement, this chapter focuses on the relationship between online information and other forms of offline engagement such as political discussion, political participation, and political information through the mass media. Shedding light on these patterns can allow us not only to assess how citizens in Western democracies are integrating the internet within their repertoires of political information and engagement but also to understand whether online politics is merely the territory of "the usual political suspects" (i.e., individuals who already engage in politics offline) or whether it is attracting voters who do not usually take part in traditional political activities or get much political information through the mass media.

Of five possible causal determinants or correlates of online political information presented here, three relate to political engagement (political discussion with friends, family, and colleagues; participation in campaign events and rallies; and volunteer work for parties or candidates), and two relate to mass media use (reading political articles in newspapers and watching political programs on television).

Offline Political Engagement and Online Political Information: New or Old Political Activists?

Political engagement is a multifaceted concept that can be measured along many different dimensions. For instance, scholars have distinguished between conventional and unconventional activities (Kaase and Marsh 1979) and between endeavors conducted inside and outside political parties (Scarrow 2007). In this research, we look at three ways in which citizens can engage in politics: by discussing it with their networks of social relationships, by taking part in offline events such as rallies, and by actively volunteering for party or campaign organizations. These three activities cover a broad spectrum of campaign-related endeavors: those that happen informally in people's everyday lives (discussing politics with friends, family, and colleagues), those that entail personal costs such as time and travel (attending campaign events), and those that manifest a stable and public commitment to a party or candidate (volunteering for a political organization). These variables are thus located at different points on the scale of political engagement, from the more informal and relatively simple (discussion) to the more formally organized and demanding (volunteering).[1]

Before we start analyzing the data, one cautionary note is in order: like the political interest and efficacy variables, measures of engagement in political discussion, attendance at campaign rallies, and volunteer activities were taken through different questions in each country survey. In some studies, respondents could simply answer yes or no to a generic query regarding their engagement in such activities, while in others they could choose among a small set of frequency options such as often, sometimes, rarely, and never; yet in others respondents were asked to recall how many days per week they had conducted some activities, so their answers ranged from zero to seven; in others still, they were asked how frequently they talked about politics among various types of groups (friends, family, and co-workers), and for each question they could choose among three or four different frequency categories, which could then be combined in aggregate measures ranging from 0 to 9 or 12.

As with the procedure followed for political interest and efficacy (see chapter 11), I normalized these different measurements by converting all variables into a range of 0 to 1, so that their minimum and maximum values are the same. However, because the number of intermediary categories varies substantially, not only among countries but also within countries for different

political activities, readers should not take these data at face value but rather as reference points through which we can assess, in each country, how those who use the internet for political information compare with those who do not. Toward this end, table 12.1 shows the mean normalized values of the three offline political engagement variables among those who did and did not rely on the web for campaign news. The table also shows the direction and statistical significance of the coefficients for these independent variables when entered into multivariate models predicting online political information.

The bivariate analyses show that, with no exception across the seven countries studied here, those who seek political information online are also more likely to discuss politics with others, to participate in offline events, and to volunteer for parties and candidates. Roughly, those who rely on the web are one and a half times more likely than those who do not to talk about politics and about three times more likely to both attend rallies and volunteer. Among the four countries (Australia, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States) where all three modes of political engagement were measured, the gap between those that do and do not get online political information was generally smaller in the United Kingdom and larger in Spain. This result is not surprising given the low percentages of Spaniards who turned to the internet for campaign news, which suggests that online political audiences should still be a rather particular cadre of dedicated and active citizens there, whereas they constitute a more inclusive subset of the population in the United Kingdom.

These findings are consistent with those presented in the previous chapter as regards political interest and sense of efficacy. Because those who engage with online politics tend to be more interested in politics and, generally, to feel more capable of affecting public affairs than the rest of the population, and because these types of voters also tend to participate in offline politics more than their fellow citizens, the correlation between online and offline political engagement may simply be spurious or indirect owing to the effect of political motivations on political action. Alternatively, this correlation may be the result of a "virtuous circle" (Norris 2000) of mutual reinforcement between online and offline politics, by which being active offline spurs online engagement, which in turn independently boosts other forms of offline engagement. To adjudicate between these hypotheses, we need to look at the data from a multivariate perspective. A multivariate analysis is also necessary to evaluate the independent impact of the three types of offline engagement

Table 12.1. Bivariate and Multivariate Relationships between Online Political Information, Political Discussion, Participation in Campaign Events, and Volunteering for Parties or Candidates

	Mean Political Discussion		Mean Participation in Rallies		Mean Volunteering		Multivariate		
	Online Information	No Online Information	Online Information	No Online Information	Online Information	No Online Information	Discussion	Rallies	Volunteer
Australia	.77	.59	.06	.02	.15	.05	+	(–)	+
France	.62	.56	—	—	—	—	(–)	//	//
Germany	—	—	.25	.06	.10	.03	//	+	(–)
Italy	—	—	.25	.10	—	—	//	(+)	//
Spain	.53	.33	.15	.05	.07	.01	+	(+)	+
United Kingdom	.73	.48	.33	.21	.18	.10	+	+	(–)
United States	.43	.29	.07	.02	.13	.05	+	+	(+)

Note: The values of all independent variables have been normalized on a 0–1 scale. For the symbols reported in the last three columns, see table 10.1.

that we are considering, which, as stated above, entail different degrees of commitment and dependence on institutional political organizations. To this end, table 12.1 also shows the multivariate correlations between offline engagement and online information.

First of all, of the sixteen correlations that could be assessed (given that two independent variables were not available in France and Italy and one was lacking in Germany), twelve turned out to be positive, with nine of them significant, while only four were negative, all of which were not significant. Apart from France and Italy, where only one of the three modes of offline engagement was measured, at least one type of offline engagement was positively and significantly correlated with web-based political information in all countries. Thus, at a general level, the relationship between the online and offline political worlds is remarkably tight. On the one hand, this pattern implies that the internet should no longer be considered a secluded cyberspace, aloof from "real" political arenas and actions. Because those who rely on the web are also eager to engage in politics through other, more traditional activities that occur in physical spaces, the online and offline worlds should be described as complementary and intertwined rather than mutually exclusive and unrelated to each other. On the other hand, this finding raises once again the question whether the internet is conducive to "politics as usual" in the sense that it merely involves those who are already engaged and, thus, simply provides more weapons to citizens who are already more vocal in offline activities rather than expanding the breadth of viewpoints that are voiced in the public sphere.

One way to answer this question is to compare the strength and direction of correlations between the three different modes of offline engagement that were included in the multivariate models. If, for instance, online political information were especially tied to relatively demanding and hierarchical activities, such as volunteering for parties and candidates, then the "politics as usual" argument would be strengthened, as the online citizenry would mostly be populated by people already involved in traditional political organizations. By contrast, if use of the web for campaign news were especially related to more common and informal endeavors, such as discussing politics with friends and family (something that requires only an interest in public affairs and the ability to articulate one's viewpoints), then the idea that online politics is a more inclusive and open realm rather than an extension of existing political hierarchies and structures would be legitimized.

The response coming from the data in table 12.1 lends more empirical support to the second than the first hypothesis. The least demanding endeavor—political discussion—had a positive and significant impact on online political information in four out of five countries in which it was measured. By contrast, the activity requiring the greatest commitment—volunteering—was positively and significantly correlated with web-based campaign news in just two out of five countries (and in two other cases the correlation was negative, although not significant). In addition, the activity that lies between these two in terms of the burden and long-term commitment it imposes on individuals—attending campaign events—also lies between in terms of the strength of its relationship with online information, with positive correlations in five out of six countries, three of which are significant. Apart from the direction and significance of the coefficients, comparing their magnitude in each country—which is possible, given the fact that all three variables were normalized on a 0–1 scale—confirms that political discussion tends to be a much stronger predictor of online political information than participation in rallies and volunteering (see the appendix). Although being politically active offline does predict engaging in politics online, the types of endeavors that more strongly affect web-based information are the most informal, autonomous, and least demanding rather than those that require permanent commitment and adherence to formal organizations such as parties or campaign committees.

Unfortunately, not much can be said with respect to differences and similarities between countries because only in four countries were all three variables measured—Australia, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States—and in these countries the multivariate correlations were rather similar. As with political interest, the positive relationship between online and offline political engagement appears to be a general rather than a context-sensitive phenomenon. France and Italy, by contrast, were the only two countries where no statistically significant multivariate correlations were found, but bivariate analyses highlight positive associations, and only one measure of offline engagement could be included in the models.

Political discussion has emerged as the participatory endeavor that most strongly predicts online political information. Among the political variables analyzed so far, its explanatory power is second only to that of political interest. In other words, those who talk about politics often and with many people are also more likely to rely on the internet for their information on public

affairs and election campaigns. Thus, political information that appears on the internet has a greater probability to reach active citizens, who will then be more likely to talk to other people about politics and, in doing so, may relay offline the contents that they encountered online.

This conclusion is not novel in empirical research—for instance, a study of British voters found that people who engaged with the election on the internet were more likely than the rest of the population to talk to others about it (Norris and Curtice 2008)—but it has never been so strongly supported across various different countries. An evaluation of the effects of digital politics thus requires assessing the intensity its messages can achieve not only directly and online but also indirectly and offline. Many studies (e.g., Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Beck et al. 2002; Campus, Pasquino, and Vaccari 2008) have shown that interpersonal communication and offline social networks affect voting behavior both directly, by conveying political messages to persuadable individuals, and indirectly, by filtering, relaying, and interpreting mass media messages (Schmitt-Beck 2003; 2004). In light of this evidence, it is highly likely that online political information, while at first mostly reaching politically interested citizens whose attitudes are relatively stable, could be a first step in a causal sequence whereby online mobilization spawns offline persuasion through interpersonal communication (Vaccari 2013b).

This pattern becomes even more intriguing if we consider recent evidence, based on panel data, that exposure to political information online leads to increased likelihood of online political discussion (Cantijoch, Cutts, and Gibson 2012). Citizens who get political information through the internet may be more likely to discuss it not only offline but online as well, particularly as web 2.0 environments allow interpersonal political activities that require overcoming a low threshold of involvement (Chadwick 2009), such as sharing contents and commenting on them.

These considerations suggest that we need to rethink the conventional wisdom according to which, because recipients of online political information are highly interested in politics, the internet cannot reach persuadable voters and, as a result, can only reinforce but not change political attitudes (Bimber and Davis 2003; Norris 2003). My reading of the empirical evidence is that, whereas the premise remains essentially true, the conclusions may not necessarily be. Citizens who are politically engaged on the net, being more likely to talk about politics with other people, can then convey the messages

they receive online through offline channels of political discussion and personal influence. Other research has shown that it is precisely those citizens who are interested in politics and seek information through the web who are most likely to be opinion leaders in their interpersonal networks (Shah and Scheufele, 2006). Thus, participants in digital politics may be particularly effective conduits of offline political information and persuasion not only because of the sheer frequency with which they converse about public affairs in their everyday lives but also because of their greater credibility and interpersonal persuasive clout. Political contents that circulate on the internet can be authoritatively relayed by people both inside and outside of it, so that what happens online does not necessarily stay online.

Offline and Online Political Information: Hybridization or Substitution?

Given that voters who rely on the internet for political information have been found to be more interested and engaged in politics, they can also be expected to be voracious consumers of political information through other channels. This possibility may be increasingly likely in a media environment in which digital and analog outlets are more and more integrated because traditional news organizations are investing massively in their online presence and because informal bottom-up commenting on and circulation of mass media contents constantly occur through the web. In chapter 11, I have suggested that these developments are leading to a hybrid or mixed media system where different technologies, genres, and relationships are constantly blended and re-mediated. Were this to be true, the boundaries between television, newspapers, and digital media should become ever more blurry, as citizens' different (political) uses of these platforms constantly overlap. Previous studies, however, have found that political information on the internet tends to correlate with newspaper reading more than television watching (Lusoli 2005). As reading political articles on newspapers is cognitively more demanding and requires more purposeful engagement than watching political stories on television (Neuman, Just, and Crigler 1992), political information on a "pull" medium such as the web may dovetail with the former more than the latter. The substitution hypothesis (Tewksbury and Rittenberg 2009), a contrasting viewpoint, argues that citizens rely on digital media instead of

traditional mass media, be it to save money (reading newspapers online is cheaper than buying the print edition), to have more control on their user experience (by personally selecting contents and the timing of their delivery), or to find types of news contents, political or otherwise, that are less commonly featured on the mass media.

If we were to find positive correlations between political information on the internet and on the mass media, the hybridization hypothesis would be corroborated on grounds that online news mostly complements rather than replaces offline news. By contrast, if negative correlations were found, then the substitution hypothesis would be validated, as information on digital media displaces that on mass media. Finally, differentiating between exposure to political contents in newspapers and on television will allow us to better understand the profile of citizens who engage with politics online, as well as highlighting how the differences between the media systems of the countries included in this study interact with these dynamics.

In order to test these hypotheses and answer these questions, table 12.2 shows the percentages of online political users that did and did not read and watch political news through newspapers and television, respectively, as well as the coefficients for these variables as resulted from multivariate models. As can be easily inferred from the data, the hybridization hypothesis has more support than the substitution one: voters who rely on the internet for political information do not do so at the expense of either television or newspapers. The relationship between new and old media is symbiotic rather than zero-sum, not least because most citizens who go online for political news chiefly turn to the websites and social media presence of established news organizations (Stanyer 2009: 205–206). In all countries apart from France, recipients of online news are also voracious consumers of offline political news.[2] These voters are what Philip Howard and Andrew Chadwick (2009: 431) have called "political omnivores," defined as "people who increasingly consume news and information over multiple media." These "power users" make little distinction between newspapers, television, and the internet. Rather, they constantly combine and integrate different sources, contents, and modes of interaction among them. On average, voters who get their campaign news on the web are twice as likely to also rely on television and newspapers to stay in touch with politics as those who ignore online news during the campaign. Thus, no evidence of a substitution effect can be found, par-

Table 12.2. Bivariate and Multivariate Relationships between Political Information through the Internet and the Mass Media

	Percentage of Citizens Who Went Online for Political Information among Voters Who				Multivariate	
	Read Political News	Did Not Read Political News	Watched Political News	Did Not Watch Political News	Newspapers	TV
Australia	37.8%	21.9%	37.0%	22.9%	(+)	(+)
France	—	—	21.2%	25.8%	//	(+)
Germany	26.2%	16.9%	25.9%	13.8%	+	+
Italy	23.5%	5.7%	19.5%	6.6%	(+)	(+)
Spain	15.6%	3.1%	10.8%	3.5%	+	(+)
United Kingdom	34.6%	33.3%	35.5%	19.8%	(+)	+
United States	47.5%	41.7%	47.2%	29.4%	(–)	(+)

Note: For the symbols reported in the last two columns, see table 10.1.

ticularly in light of the results of the multivariate models, where twelve out of thirteen coefficients were positive and four of them were significant. The internet is now closely intertwined with all other relevant mass media and the boundaries between these realms seem indeed to be blurring and shifting, to the point that citizens may almost forget that they exist. Again, thinking about the online and offline realms as separate and mutually exclusive is increasingly less useful, as they clearly are not so in citizens' informational diets.

Looking at the differences between correlations involving newspaper reading and television watching also indirectly confirms that this is the case. In the two countries where internet use for political information was lowest among citizens—Italy and Spain—reading newspapers is more strongly associated with internet use than watching television is. Spaniards and Italians who read political news were five and four and a half times more likely, respectively, to get online campaign updates than their fellow citizens who did not read newspapers. By contrast, in the same countries, those who watched political news were about three times more likely to also use the internet than those who avoided politics on television. In the remaining four countries where use of the internet for political information is more widespread

(excluding France where a comparison between television and newspapers cannot be made because the latter variable was not measured), newspaper readers and television news watchers were more or less equally overrepresented among users of the internet for political information compared to those who avoided news on the mass media. As the internet becomes increasingly integrated into people's everyday lives and informational diets, its political use appears to overlap equally, or similarly, with that of a more complex and demanding medium such as the newspaper as it does with reliance on a simpler and more passive channel such as television. This finding was confirmed by multivariate analyses, where—apart from Spain—the correlations involving newspapers are similar, in terms of direction and statistical significance, to those related to television.

A particularly interesting, and somewhat puzzling, case is that of the United Kingdom. British citizens who read political articles in newspapers were not at all more likely to go online for political information than those who kept away from print news. By contrast, watching political news on television correlated much more strongly with getting political news online in both bivariate and multivariate analyses—that is, even after taking into account interest in politics, political efficacy, and all the other independent variables in the model. These patterns can be explained by the peculiar features of the UK media system. First, the null finding for newspaper reading should be contextualized within the particular characteristics of British print journalism; second, the positive finding for television—which involves Germany as well as the United Kingdom—should be read in light of the particularly important role played by the public service broadcaster.

With respect to print journalism, as Hallin and Mancini (2004: 12, 211) explain, in Britain "there historically have been three distinct cultures of journalism, sharing some common characteristics, to be sure, but diverging sharply on others—the tabloid press, the quality press, and broadcasting." In particular, a rather clear distinction exists between the quality and tabloid press: while the former is committed to factual reporting and intensely covers political institutions and policy issues, the latter tends to "reject the constraints of objective reporting, and to present the newspaper as speaking for the common citizen and 'common sense.'" Tabloid news coverage heavily focuses on scandals, personalities, gossip, celebrities, and everyday life stories rather than the workings of political institutions, actions by elected officials, and statements by political parties. As a result, readers of tabloid newspapers

differ substantially from those of the quality press, which has historically been identified with the broadsheet format. Consistently, we should expect British readers of broadsheet newspapers to be more politically engaged and, thus, to get political information through the internet much more than those of tabloids, and the data support this hypothesis: among those who reported that they most often read a broadsheet newspaper, 54.7% also claimed to have used the internet for campaign news; by contrast, only 28.4% among tabloid readers also went online for political information.[3] Thus, if one accounts for the differences between quality and tabloid newspaper cultures, which also exist elsewhere but are particularly strong and rooted in the United Kingdom, British readers of quality newspapers are heavy consumers of online political information similar to newspaper readers writ large in other countries.[4]

We can shed further light on the relationship between political information on television and on the internet by comparing the results of the multivariate models in all seven countries. As can be seen in table 12.2, Germany and the United Kingdom are the only two countries where the correlation was positive and statistically significant. One possible explanation may lie in the particular relevance of public service broadcasting and the type of political reporting it offers in these political systems. Comparative research has shown that public service television can increase citizens' information about public affairs, particularly among the lower socioeconomic strata of the population (Curran et al. 2009). Accordingly, one could expect that, in countries where public broadcasting is strong and effectively fulfills this pedagogical role, citizens watching its programs may be encouraged to also turn to the internet in order to acquire supplemental information and find opportunities to get more engaged. By contrast, no such incentive to gather online information may exist for citizens in countries where public service broadcasting is either limited or less oriented toward its public mission and where, as a result, television news is less focused on politics and less dedicated to engaging viewers in it.

Although public broadcasters achieve between 30% and 40% of primetime ratings in France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom (Leckner and Facht 2010), the amount of public funds that German and British public broadcasters receive clearly stands out. Whereas Germany spends 88.5 euros per capita per annum to support its public service media and the United Kingdom spends 68.2 euros, France spends 48.6 euros and Italy spends only 28 euros per person per annum (data for 2008 reported in R. K. Nielsen with

Linnebank 2011); in Spain, the government withdrew funding for public television in the 1980s (although the state assumed the massive debt the company had accumulated) and restored it only in 2009, when advertisements were banned as well.[5] These funding decisions are indicative of broader systemic arrangements that affect the relationship between media and politics in each country, including the way in which public service television interprets its role. In France, Italy, and Spain, which Hallin and Mancini (2004) classify under the polarized pluralist model of media-politics relationships, public broadcasting has low autonomy from political parties, and its political reporting tends to reflect these influences. By contrast, the British BBC is probably the best example of a public service broadcaster that is highly professional, autonomous from political organizations, and dedicated to its public mission. The German public broadcaster is more closely controlled by parliamentary parties and civic groups, but it has generally managed to maintain a certain political autonomy, also because of the strong supervising role of the Constitutional Court that has often taken decisive action to preserve the network's independence (Hallin and Mancini 2004: 167–168).

The two countries covered in this study where exposure to political television news was positively and significantly correlated to use of the internet for political information are characterized by public service broadcasters that are financially strong, relevant to the public, politically autonomous, and strongly committed to delivering news on public affairs. As a result, citizens who get their political news through television in these countries are more likely than those in other countries to receive abundant, wide-ranging, and factually informed reporting of public affairs. In the medium term, this informational diet may increase these audiences' political knowledge and engagement and thus also make them more likely to feel the need for supplemental political information and participation—which they may seek online. Effective public service broadcasters thus not only make citizens more informed, as Curran and colleagues (2009) have argued, but also seem to increase their audiences' engagement with other information channels, thus breeding "political omnivores" who receive and diffuse political contents through a wide spectrum of media. To the extent that critically consuming a diverse set of media sources is an important component of citizenship in the information society (Neuman, Bimber, and Hindman 2011), public service television in Germany and the United Kingdom seems to be effectively fulfilling its civic role in the era of hybrid media, as it did in the mass media age.

This chapter has shown that digital media are part and parcel of citizens' everyday political and civic lives and that the internet is strongly integrated with both interpersonal and mediated channels of political communication—from discussions with family, friends, and colleagues to exposure to news stories in the press and on television. Comparatively, however, use of digital media for political information is more strongly related to interpersonal than to mediated forms of political communication: political discussion was positively and significantly correlated to online political information four out of five times, as opposed to two out of six times and two out of seven times for newspaper reading and television watching, respectively. Citizens who engage with politics through the web are more likely to bridge the online and offline worlds through active forms of discussion and message dissemination via interpersonal networks than through passive consumption of mass media content. While this pattern is consistent with the "lean forward" affordances of the internet, this chapter has fleshed out a politically consequential implication of digital politics: that its messages not only interact with those in the mass media but are likely to ripple through outside of their primary audiences because those who engage with politics on the web are strongly inclined to also discuss politics with other people. This aspect is made even more relevant by the increasing diffusion of social media, which embed interpersonal communication within citizens' everyday online experiences and constitute a viable channel for the propagation of personal influence (boyd and Ellison 2007; Gonzalez-Bailon, Kaltenbrunner, and Banchs 2010) as well as for the distribution of calls to political action, among which people can choose those which suit them best (Bennett and Segerberg 2012).

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Correlates of Online Political Information in Seven Democracies

Having considered how socioeconomic status, political culture, political preferences, political engagement, and mass media use correlate with voters' propensity to acquire political information through the internet, we can complete the analysis by comparing the results of multivariate logistic regression models across the seven countries included in this study, highlighting the similarities and differences among these political systems. Table 13.1 shows the results of a qualitative meta-analysis that, for each independent variable included in the regression models, reports the direction of each country's coefficient, thus showing whether the correlation was positive or negative, and indicates whether it was statistically significant at the conventional threshold of $p \leq .05$.[1] For ease of comparison, in countries where surveys for two general elections were available, I included the most recent election (Italy 2008 and Australia 2010). Readers who are interested in examining the individual coefficients can refer to the appendix (tables A.4 to A.10).

Before presenting the results of this analysis, three caveats must be offered regarding the validity of the relationships that emerged from the data.

Table 13.1. Meta-analysis of the Findings of Multivariate Regression Models Predicting Online Political Information in Each Country's Last General Election

	Australia	France	Germany	Italy	Spain	United Kingdom	United States
Gender (male)	+	+	+	(+)	+	+	(–)
Race (white)	//	(–)	//	//	//	(+)	(+)
Age	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Education	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Urban density	+	+	(–)	(+)	+	//	(+)
Income	(+)	(+)	(+)	//	(+)	+	+
Religious attendance	–	(–)	(–)	(+)	(+)	(+)	(+)
Interest in politics	+	(+)	(+)	+	+	+	+
Sense of efficacy	+	–	+	(+)	+	(+)	+
Political trust	(+)	(–)	//	(+)	–	+	(–)
Ideology	None	None	None	Left > right	None	//	Lib > Cons
Party identification	None	None	+ Other parties	+ Other parties	+ PSOE, No party	+ Lib-Dems	None
Political discussion	+	(–)	//	//	+	+	+
Participation in rallies	(–)	//	+	(+)	(+)	+	+
Working for parties/candidates	+	//	(–)	//	+	(–)	(+)
Reading political news	(+)	//	+	(+)	+	(+)	(–)
Watching political news	(+)	(+)	+	(+)	(+)	+	(+)

Note: + indicates a statistically significant ($p \leq .05$) positive relationship, (+) indicates a statistically not significant positive relationship, – indicates a statistically significant negative relationship, (–) indicates a statistically not significant negative relationship, and // indicates that the variable was not included in the model.

The first is that, as is well known, cross-sectional survey data such as those employed here can highlight correlations between variables but cannot fully establish causation. Doing so would require (at least) longitudinal data that are currently not available in comparative research on digital politics. Even if modeling use of the internet for political information as a dependent rather than independent variable leads to plausible arguments (see chapter 4), the causal patterns of influence suggested in this and the previous chapters should be treated as hypothetical rather than definitive.

The second caveat is that the relationships that have been found here may not necessarily be stable over time. As shown by Bimber and Copeland (2013) with US data and by Bimber et al. (2012) with UK data, relationships between internet use and various forms of political participation are inconsistent and idiosyncratic because they are contingent on context and timing. Although Bimber and colleagues tested the inverse causal relationship (from internet use to political engagement), there is no reason to rule out that similar fluctuations may occur in the causal patterns tested here. It is my hope that the analyses and interpretations presented in this book will help us move toward better specified theories that allow us to explain some of the likely variations through time in the relationships between online and offline political engagement by taking into account contextual changes, to the extent that these have systematic effects. Shedding light on these issues, however, requires greater and sustained scholarly efforts, not least because a certain number of electoral campaigns need to take place before one can test the effects of different electoral contexts.

Finally, the third caveat is that different patterns might emerge from the same causal models if other dependent variables measuring different aspects of online engagement were to be considered. As I argued in chapter 2, acquiring political information through the internet can be seen as the first step on a ladder of web-based political engagement that comprises multiple activities and endeavors. In this study, I have not moved beyond this first step, not least because of the lack of reliable measures that could travel across the seven countries analyzed here. Future research, however, should ask how different facets of online political engagement are shaped by systemic and individual factors in comparative perspective.

Because the previous chapters have already discussed the results for the most relevant independent variables included in the regression models, in this chapter I return to the theoretical framework and main research ques-

tions that inspired this book (see chapter 2 and table 2.1) and frame the discussion of the comparative findings around them. Thus, I focus on how patterns of citizens' exposure to online political information intersect with issues of *inequalities*, *engagement*, and *competition*.

The Internet and Political Inequalities

Questions of inequality in the demand, citizen-driven side of internet politics mainly involve digital divides in access and democratic divides in participation (Nam and Stromer-Galley 2012). We have already noted that such inequalities, far from disappearing because of technological development and diffusion, are found across all seven Western democracies in this study. These patterns were remarkably consistent even though the percentages of the population in each country that got some political information through the internet varied widely, from almost half the electorate in the United States to one-tenth in Spain (see figure 9.1). Comparing the findings of the multivariate models across countries, two variables clearly stand out as those with the greatest and most consistent predictive power: *age* and *education* correlated negatively and positively, respectively, with online political information. These results are not surprising in and of themselves, as they confirm the conclusions of previous research. What is interesting, however, is that no exception to the rule was found across seven different political systems despite all the contextual diversity—including, among others, demographic variations in the age structure of the population and differences in educational policies—and despite the fact that engagement in online politics varies widely from country to country. These differences notwithstanding, in all seven democracies the younger and better-educated voters were consistently more likely than the rest of the population to get campaign news through the internet. The effects of education were found to be comparatively more uniform than those of age, suggesting that the impact of skills on web-based political engagement is less sensitive to contextual conditions than that of age.

The universality of these correlations suggests that there are some aspects of the technology—in particular, its complexity and its constant development, which require specific and constantly updated skills—that are by and large independent of context, at least within the realm of Western democracies. No matter what populations employ them and in spite of the peculiarities of their political and social systems, acquiring full citizenship in the realm of

digital politics requires clearing some hurdles related to knowledge and confidence with technology.

From a normative standpoint, I have already noted that these findings leave us with a mixed blessing. On the one hand, the educational bias among citizens who engage with online politics produces a skewed distribution of preferences among internet audiences, which may easily result in distortions in the political opinions that are voiced online. In particular, this pattern may lead to an even further neglect of the preferences of the lower classes (to the extent that they tend to be less educated, as income per se does not have an independent causal impact on web-based political information, save for the United States and United Kingdom). On the other hand, the age bias that was found among citizens who get their campaign news through the internet has the potential to compensate for the contrary age bias that is usually found in other dimensions of political information and participation, thus tilting the generational scale of political engagement to a more balanced position between younger and older cohorts. The predominance of relatively younger sectors of the population in online politics may be a life-cycle effect based on the fact that younger voters are more eager to experiment with technology and learn digital skills. Alternatively, it may be a cohort effect that depends on the fact that the generations that are currently younger have been socialized during a massive change in the ways in which information is produced and distributed. If the former hypothesis is true, we should expect younger voters of the future to be more eager to engage with online politics than the younger voters of today, which would permanently empower the youth with a platform to articulate and advocate their preferences. If, by contrast, the latter scenario is accurate, then the generations that are currently between 18 and 35 years of age will be overrepresented online even as they grow older and the cohorts that will replace them as well as today's older voters are not bound to catch up. The changing nature of technology suggests that life cycle effects may prevail over cohort effects, but only longitudinal empirical research will allow us to answer these questions.

Two other relevant aspects of inequality, *gender* and *income*, provide another mixed normative blessing. Male voters were significantly more likely than females to rely on the internet for political information in all countries but Italy (where the relationship was nonetheless positive and close to statistical significance) and the United States. Once again, the near ubiquity of this finding is remarkable and suggests that the gender gaps in political engage-

ment that have historically been found across many countries and political domains are being replicated rather than reduced on the internet. Here, too, contextual conditions—including cultural role conceptions, economic circumstances, and policies that help women balance work and family care—fail to alter the overall pattern, suggesting that gender gaps in online political information may be mostly caused by motivational factors that are not noticeably affected by contextual differences.

By contrast, in four out of six countries in which income was measured, no evidence emerged of statistically significant online political inequalities between richer and poorer voters once other independent variables were controlled for. Only in the United States and the United Kingdom, where income inequalities are overall greater, did this factor turn out to be significant. Growing income inequalities are one of the most important developments in Western democracies, and because their causes are partially rooted in political mechanisms (Hacker and Pierson 2010), it is particularly troublesome that the political demands coming from online audiences are more likely to be skewed in favor of richer voters precisely in those countries where such inequalities are already greater. That being said, the lack of significant correlations in Australia, France, Germany, and Spain—where the coefficients were, however, positive—suggests moderate optimism that in most countries digital media are not deepening inequalities in the political voice and representation of lower-income voters. Comparative analysis also suggests that electoral arrangements may mitigate and, perhaps, reverse the effect of income on web-based political engagement. A case in point is Australia where, despite relatively high levels of income inequality, compulsory voting prompts almost all citizens to cast their ballots, so that lower-income voters have a compelling incentive to inform themselves. These citizens often do so through the web, as shown by regression models in Australia, where income turned out to be negatively and significantly associated with online political information after controlling for internet use. Accordingly, the United States and United Kingdom are not only the most unequal countries in terms of income but also the political systems in which voter turnout is on average the lowest, by and large due to low participation rates among poorer voters. Thus, contrary to age, education, and gender, the relationship between income and online political information seems to be strongly affected by the sociopolitical context and the institutions that channel these inputs into the political system.

Two other variables related to inequalities were included in the models: *race* and *urban density*. Race showed no significant correlation with online political information, with white majorities turning out to be as likely as ethnic minorities to rely on the web for campaign news once all other factors were controlled for. Thus, a troubling dimension of political inequality is not being reproduced online, suggesting that the notion that the internet simply mirrors offline patterns is overly simplistic if it becomes an umbrella generalization spanning across multiple layers of social stratification. Urban density—which I did not discuss in the previous chapters owing to space considerations—had a similar impact in the six countries where it was measured, with voters residing in urban areas more likely to rely on the internet for political information than those living in rural parts of their countries (the lone exception being Germany, where the coefficient was negative but very small and not significant). People living in urban areas have greater incentives to go online for campaign news mainly for two reasons: first, internet connections, particularly broadband, are more easily available and cheaper in urban centers; second, urban residents tend to encounter more political stimuli (and more incentives to adopt technological innovations) because their social relationships are usually more diverse than those of citizens who reside in less densely populated areas. Because these patterns are general rather than related to particular contextual conditions, it is not surprising that the relationship is positive across five out of six countries.

Political equality is thus threatened by patterns of internet adoption and use that disproportionately benefit voters who are male, are better educated, and reside in urban areas, where access to technology is cheaper and social surroundings are livelier. Strong disparities also exist with respect to age, but they are less worrisome from a normative standpoint because they balance reverse offline gaps. Income inequalities are less relevant across the board, although they affect online political information (and thus, potentially, voice) to a greater extent in countries where such discrepancies are already higher, thus possibly engendering a vicious circle of reinforcing disparities. However, political conditions such as voter turnout affect this relationship to the point of reversing it in Australia, suggesting that digital media mirror economic stratification only when and where political factors do not provide a counterbalancing force. Finally, race does not seem to affect people's propensity to engage with online politics at all, which suggests that digital media are color blind, at least at the information stage of engagement.

Another broad finding that emerges from the comparison is that the social stratification of internet use is not necessarily less pronounced in those countries whose populations are responding more enthusiastically to internet politics—such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, where at least one-third of respondents reported relying on the web for political information—than in those where interest in the online campaigns has so far been milder, with citizens engaged online ranging between one-fourth (Germany) and one-tenth (Spain) of the population. Although the United States and the United Kingdom are among the three countries where online political engagement was highest, in both countries income affected use of the internet for campaign news more than in the remaining democracies, and the other sociodemographic variables had similar effects there as elsewhere. In Italy, where attention to online political information was comparatively low, the only discriminating factors were age and education, whereas gender is not statistically significant after controlling for all other variables. The direction and significance of the sociodemographic coefficients in Australia, where more than one-third of citizens relied on the web for campaign news, are identical to those in Spain, where only one-tenth did so. These patterns suggest that inequalities related to socioeconomic factors do not necessarily disappear as diffusion of the internet across the population increases. To the contrary, notable gaps in online political engagement among different social groups may persist even as political uses of digital media spread across a country, as the US case shows. Thus, the social stratification of online political information may look remarkably similar in countries where the latter is common and in others where it is rare.

A corollary of this finding is that, even if countries where online political engagement is currently low were to follow in the footsteps of democracies, such as the United States, where the internet is part and parcel of the political lives of half the population, we should not expect social inequalities—and, thus, distortions in political voice and representation—to be necessarily reduced, let alone cancelled. To the extent that diffusion of online political engagement will take place, it will not necessary span equally throughout populations. As a result, groups that are marginalized in online politics should not be thought as "lagging behind," an expression that suggests that they are destined to "catch up" as soon as innovation diffuses (Warren 2007: 375). Instead, it is more appropriate to characterize social stratification in online political engagement as the result of rather resilient ceilings that limit the

motivations of particular social groups. Such motivations can be affected by political context and institutions (like compulsory voting and turnout-depressing rules) more than by patterns of technological diffusion. To the extent that the integration of digital media into the everyday lives of citizens in Western democracies will resemble a rising tide, we should expect that it will not lift all boats to the same heights.

The Internet and Political Engagement

Issues of *engagement* address the relationship between online political information and citizens' political interest and support, offline political participation, and media preferences for political news. The impact that these factors have on using the web for political information can help us understand the role of digital media in the civic lives and repertoires of political action of citizens in contemporary Western democracies.

The clearest finding in this domain across all seven countries studied here is that *interest in politics* strongly predicts getting political information on the web. The near universality of this correlation (with positive coefficients in the seven countries, all but France and Germany statistically significant) is hardly surprising given that, as a "pull" and "high-choice" medium, the internet allows citizens to select the types of contents they are exposed to, or at least it does so more than other mass media. This general pattern is not sensitive to contextual factors because it is rooted in the specific characteristics of the medium as it has been adopted in contemporary Western democracies. That it is mostly the politically interested voters who rely on the web for information can be taken as a confirmation of the reinforcement hypothesis, according to which digital media can further engage citizens who are already engaged but can do little to attract those who are detached from politics. Although this question cannot be fully addressed with the data that I relied on for this research, the results of my comparative analysis indicate that the reinforcement hypothesis may tell only part of the story of digital media and political engagement. In four out of five countries where it was measured, offline *political discussion* was positively and significantly correlated with online political information, suggesting that those citizens who rely on the internet to keep up with public affairs and political matters are also more likely to talk about these issues within their social circles. This nearly universal finding (the sole exception being France, where the dependent variable was measured in a different

way from the remaining countries and various independent variables related to engagement were not available) is probably explained by the same demand-driven characteristics of the medium that make it more appealing for politically interested voters, but it suggests a different conclusion as regards the mobilizing and persuasive potential of online political communication. While the internet may not *directly* engage citizens who are not already interested in politics, it may do so *indirectly* by influencing active participants to networks of political discussion, who are especially likely to get their news through the web and may then relay these contents to their conversational partners. Engagement with digital media may not affect people's political attitudes, but heavy users of digital media may influence the people they talk to.

By contrast, *sense of efficacy* and *political trust* correlate with online political information in ways that differ depending on political context and, especially, political culture, which in turn affects the types of citizens that are more likely to engage in online politics and, as a result, the types of political demands that are bound to be voiced through the web. In countries whose populations are confident in their ability to make their voices heard and generally support political authorities—such as Australia, Germany, the United Kingdom, and (to a lesser degree) the United States—online politics mostly caters to citizens who, despite being critical of some authorities and outputs of the political system, are overall content with it and do not question its legitimacy. On the other hand, in democracies where political parties have never enjoyed widespread mass support and levels of political trust have historically been low—as is the case in France, Italy, and Spain—internet politics attracts citizens who feel less efficacious (France) or who trust parties less (Spain) or who are neither more nor less likely to express political support (Italy) than the rest of the population. As a result, the types of political inputs that are more likely to be channeled by the internet are quite different. To quote the typology proposed by Kaase and Marsh (1979), "reformist" voters and demands should be more common in the online public spheres of Anglo-Saxon and Northern European countries, whereas in Mediterranean countries "protesters" should play a greater role in digital politics. Thus, the ideas and demands that are articulated through digital media seem to reflect the characteristics of political culture in each country rather than resulting from universal affordances and diffusion patterns of the internet.

The variables measuring offline political engagement allow us to place online political information in the context of contemporary citizens' repertoires

of political action. The impact of more traditional types of on-the-ground involvement such as *participation in rallies* and *volunteering for parties and candidates* is generally positive but weaker than for political discussion; moreover, attending rallies is more strongly correlated with getting online campaign news than volunteering is. Taken together, these findings suggest that, in general, those who rely on the internet for political news are more politically active than the average voter, but more in the sense of informal and autonomous engagement—political discussion and attendance of events—than as part of hierarchical organizations requiring high commitment, such as parties or campaign committees. The positive correlations between online and offline forms of political engagement highlight that the internet is well integrated in people's everyday lives and political endeavors. As a consequence, any notion of "digital life" as a separate realm from "real life" is no longer empirically defensible, if it ever was. Little systematic differences were found across countries in this respect, which suggests that such phenomena are occurring in similar ways across Western democracies, most likely as the result of the near-universal impact of interest in politics on internet-based information as well as offline engagement.

On a related note, the relationship between the internet and the mass media has turned out to be symbiotic and reciprocal rather than exclusionary. In general, online political information showed positive correlations, albeit often failing to achieve statistical significance, with both *watching television news* and *reading newspaper articles* related to politics. That political information through the press predicts online information to a similar extent as television news suggests that, contrary to previous studies that found newspaper reading to be more closely related to online political engagement than television watching, the internet is now so integrated with citizens' political lives that its use dovetails to a similar degree with all major mass media, irrespective of how cognitively demanding they are. Given this general proposition, the peculiar contours of media systems in different countries were also found to matter significantly, in particular with respect to the role of public service broadcasters. Citizens that watch political news in Germany and the United Kingdom can rely on authoritative, independent, and popular public broadcasters that perform their informational and educational functions more effectively than those in other countries, which are either less generously funded, less politically autonomous, or both. As a result, the news that these citizens receive through television are more likely to elicit desire for additional politi-

cal information and engagement opportunities, which the internet can help satisfy. Together with distinctions related to the role of different print news cultures in the United Kingdom, these findings suggest that legacies and models of journalism, media policies, and media-politics relationships contribute to shaping the ways in which citizens engage with online politics in Western democracies. The more the mass media stimulate voters' interest in public affairs and engage them in political debates, the more citizens will be likely to complement these contents with online political endeavors.

The Internet and Political Competition

Studying political competition on the internet is important because the web is increasingly harnessed by political organizations not only to distribute messages but also to mobilize resources that are strategic for other realms of electioneering (such as organizing rallies, canvassing, and buying media advertisements). We saw in part II that parties and candidates are beginning to appreciate these opportunities and, as a result, they are no longer prioritizing information over participation functions on their websites but instead are adopting a more balanced approach by which these endeavors receive similar attention and investment. As we saw earlier, citizens who rely on the internet for political information are also more likely than others to talk about public affairs with their friends, family, and co-workers, which implies that messages that circulate on the web can then be distributed through citizens' networks of interpersonal communication. As a result, garnering attentive and engaged audiences is crucial to the success of online campaigning not only per se but with respect to its offline implications. Therefore, different competitive scenarios can result from the distribution of political preferences among citizens who engage in online politics.

The comparative analysis allows us to uncover important phenomena in three broad domains: the effects of *incumbency*, the opportunities for *minor parties*, and the overall *partisan and ideological orientations* of online political audiences. With respect to incumbency, the expectation that supporters of parties that are in opposition should be more engaged online than those of incumbents was met in only three out of nine elections included in this study: the 2006 Italian elections, the 2007 Australian elections, and the 2008 US elections—all of which saw a predominance, within online audiences, of voters ideologically closer to the left-wing parties that were out of power. The

count of cases that provide supportive evidence can be increased to four out of nine if we also include the 2010 UK elections, when voters who identified with the Liberal-Democrats—which challenged both the incumbent Labour and their Conservative opponents, but arguably a party whose voters are closer to progressive than conservative positions—stood out for their propensity to rely on the internet for campaign news. Although no significant multivariate correlation was found in the 2007 French elections, the eagerness with which supporters of centrist candidate Bayrou relied on the internet reveals some similarities with the British case.

However, in the 2010 Australian and 2008 Italian elections, when the roles of incumbents and challengers had been reversed compared to the previous race, supporters of the main parties in opposition were not more likely to engage with online politics than those of the incumbents. Actually, Italian progressive voters continued being more active on the web in 2008 even as their parties had controlled government for the previous two years, which suggests that the Italian left may have built a broader internet constituency than the right which is not affected by the ups and downs of electoral results. Thus, the hypothesis that supporters of challenger parties should be more committed to online politics was fully upheld in the United States and partially so in Australia and the United Kingdom, whereas the Italian situation suggests a more enduring dynamic favoring progressives. A similar online predominance of the left seems to be in place in Spain, where identifying with the Socialist Party strongly correlated with getting political information on the internet in 2008.

It is perhaps no coincidence that the Italian and Spanish results suggest enduring ties between progressive voters and digital media irrespective of alternation in government. This pattern could be seen as an example of *media-party parallelism*, that is, of strong linkages between the media and party systems (Seymour-Ure 1974). Media-party parallelism can manifest itself in many ways, among which are correlations between citizens' political preferences and the media outlets they get their news from. Hetty van Kempen (2007) studied these correlations in fifteen European countries and, among the five countries included in this study, found the highest levels of media-party parallelism in Italy and Spain, moderately high values in France and Britain, and very low values in Germany. (Although the United States and Australia were not included in this study, most studies suggest that parallelism should be rather low there too; see Hallin and Mancini 2004). Thus, just as choices of

different newspapers or television channels strongly correlate with Italians' and Spaniards' political preferences, the same could be happening with their use of the internet to get political information.

Minor party identifiers, who are less likely to find information about their favored political organizations on the mainstream media and in interpersonal communication, may have greater incentives to take advantage of the panoply of political contents that are available online, as was found in the 2008 Italian and the 2009 German elections. In the 2008 Spanish elections, those who refused to name any party with which they identified were among the most intense participants in the internet campaign. Thus, in many countries the internet seems to be attracting voters who do not support any of the major parties, which may result in a more pluralistic public sphere where those who are not satisfied with the main competitors in the electoral marketplace can still find political contents that suit their preferences. These findings run counter to the most pessimistic predictions of normalization, which argue that major parties invariably find it easier to amass large audiences online than minor parties do.

Looking back at the types of countries where incumbency affected online political competition and those where online audiences tilted toward minor parties, electoral systems seem to be playing an important role. Incumbent-challenger dynamics were found to be relevant in the United States and, to a more modest degree, the United Kingdom and Australia, which all employ majoritarian systems. By contrast, minor party supporters prevailed in Germany, Italy, and Spain (in the latter two, voters who identified with progressive incumbent parties were also overrepresented online), which all employ proportional systems. Similar to the supply side of digital politics (see chapter 6), the demand side may be affected by the vision of democracy (Powell 2000) that prevails in each country, which in turn is shaped by electoral systems.

When majoritarian systems structure the competition, elections provide clear governing mandates to one party (or coalition) and getting one more vote than the competition is the only way to access power: thus, major oppositional parties and their supporters are bound to place all their stakes on winning the election to get back into government. These conditions may disproportionally motivate challengers to rely on digital media—or, for that matter, any other suitable communication or organizational innovation—to close the competitive gap with their incumbent opponents. Majoritarian systems usually reduce the number of parties that can aspire to a stake in

government, thus discouraging minor parties from competing aggressively and their supporters from devoting much attention and energy to the campaign.

By contrast, when proportional systems are employed, elections serve to designate representatives who then bargain after the vote to form parliamentary coalitions. As a result, the link between electoral results and governing outcomes is weaker and the ties between voters and individual parties are stronger than in majoritarian systems (Norris 2004). These arrangements may also explain why supporters of some parties engage with the online campaign more than others regardless of whether their parties are in power or not—to the extent that the elections are less about designating a government, the incumbent-challenger distinction is only one among many factors that can affect parties' and voters' online efforts. Moreover, minor parties have greater chances to win seats and influence government in proportional than in majoritarian systems, which creates greater incentives for their supporters to engage with the online campaign than in contexts when their favorite parties have no realistic opportunities to make any impact.

Thus, the hypothesis that challengers may find greater and more engaged audiences online does not apply everywhere and in as clear-cut a way as some of its proponents suggest, but it seems to be valid only in some elections conducted under majoritarian systems. By the same token, the hypothesis that minor parties may have difficulties in finding captive audiences online does not apply equally well to all political systems but is strongly tied to the presence of majoritarian electoral systems that discourage minor party supporters from engaging with the campaign, online and elsewhere. By contrast, proportional systems encourage supporters of some minor parties to rely on the internet.

A final note involves the overall ideological and partisan preferences of online audiences. In six out of nine elections, progressive voters (counting UK Liberal-Democrats supporters as such) have turned out to be more engaged with the online campaign than the rest of the electorate, whereas in no country were conservative supporters keener on getting political information through the web. Progressives were more active online in three out of four elections in which conservatives controlled the incumbent government, but they were also more engaged in two out of four elections in which their own favorite parties were ruling their countries. (The 2010 UK elections, when Labour was in power and Liberal-Democratic voters were the most attentive to

online information, can be seen as a borderline case.) It thus seems that, beyond the effects of incumbency, the left is outperforming the right on the internet, at least in the political systems and within the time frame included in this study. The analysis of online political competition at the voter level has thus revealed another analogy with that at the party and candidate level. In both domains, progressives seem to be embracing digital media more than conservatives or, at least, little evidence to the contrary could be found across the seven countries included in this study. Whereas the internet is clearly a politically neutral technology in and of itself, left-wing organizations and supporters have taken advantage of its affordances more than right-wing ones.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Conclusion

This journey across both the party-controlled supply and citizen-driven demand sides of digital politics in seven important Western democracies has highlighted various relevant developments of online political communication. In this concluding chapter, I summarize them and suggest ways in which future research could further the work that has been presented here. In a nutshell, these considerations have to do with the role of the American model in the theory and practice of politics online; the importance of context and organizations; the relationship between supply and demand of digital politics; and, finally, the blurring of boundaries between online and offline political communication and their implications for theory and research.

Beware of Americanization

One of the main goals of the research presented in this book has been to move beyond simplistic generalizations of empirical findings derived from the United States. This goal has been fulfilled by showing how contextual

variations shape the political uses of the internet by parties and citizens. In particular, two important theories of digital politics that originated in the United States have been challenged by the findings shown here: normalization and outparty innovation incentives.

The theory of normalization—well summarized by the "politics as usual" proposition—claims that offline inequalities are bound to be mirrored in online politics. On the supply side, this means that major parties are expected to provide a richer web presence than minor parties. Yet, although the data show that greater financial resources lead to more sophisticated websites, the relationship is not as strong as proponents of normalization imply. Small parties are not doomed to be left behind in digital communication, particularly in proportional systems, where they have greater incentives to compete effectively because they have realistic possibilities to win parliamentary seats and affect government formation and policies. Normalization posits that parties and candidates will use the internet to simply "pour old wine into new bottles," transferring offline top-down contents and endeavors into whatever medium is new at a given time rather than harnessing its participatory affordances. But whereas it is true that most party and candidate websites do not make full use of all the features and tools that would theoretically be available to them—including responding to emails efficiently—they nonetheless give, on average, roughly equal weight to information and participation functions. So, to the extent that the features of digital media that have the greatest transformative potential are the opportunities they offer to engage voters, political actors are not forgoing them altogether in favor of unilateral distribution of contents. Indeed, it is precisely in the United States that political websites were the most participatory over the analyzed period, so in this sense the normalization theory is at odds with the US reality as well (at least at the level of major parties and their presidential candidates).

On the demand side, normalization implies that the audience for digital politics is disproportionally populated by supporters of the largest parties. As shown by the data, however, followers of minor parties in countries that employ proportional electoral systems actively engage with online politics, often more so than those who identify with major parties. Even in a majoritarian democracy such as the United Kingdom, the internet helped channel the enthusiasm of voters who felt close to the Liberal-Democratic Party, which challenged the dominance of the two parties that had contended government for

over a century. Furthermore, proponents of normalization claim that digital media do not diminish political inequalities among citizens but rather reproduce offline disparities in political participation and possibly create new forms of segregation related to the uneven distribution of internet access and skills. The data indicate that political inequalities do exist online, but they do not necessarily follow the same pattern that can be found in the United States. Younger and better-educated voters are universally more likely to rely on the internet for political information, but income inequalities are a significant predictor of online engagement only in the United States and the United Kingdom (in Australia, the income gap is even reversed online). Racial minorities are also slightly underrepresented online in the United States but not in the other countries (France and the United Kingdom) where ethnicity is a relevant political factor. Finally, unlike in any other country included in this study, American female voters are not less likely than males to rely on the web for news on public affairs, thus closing this dimension of the gender gap. Although offline political inequalities translate online to some degree, the social stratification of digital politics in the United States is distinctive compared to that in most other Western democracies. The fact that younger voters are more likely to engage with digital politics counterbalances the long-running pattern of lower offline political engagement among the youth, so that, in terms of age groups, politics online is more "unusual" than "as usual."

A simplified version of the outparty innovation incentives theory claims that challenger parties and their voters should be more eager to embrace digital politics than incumbents, among both political elites and their supporters. Once again, however, the findings of my research lend little empirical support to this theory outside the United States. As regards political websites, candidates from the challenger party in the 2008 US presidential election—the Democrats—did outperform those from the incumbent one, but this pattern was not mirrored as systematically in any other country included in this study. Challengers offered more sophisticated websites in the 2006 Italian and 2007 Australian elections, but the pattern was reversed in the following 2008 and 2010 elections, respectively.[1] Factors such as party ideology and organizational inclusiveness seem to affect political websites more than alternation in government, at least in the medium term. With respect to voters, in the United States liberals (by and large supporting the challenger party) were more likely than conservatives to engage in online politics in 2008. In other

countries that employ majoritarian electoral systems (Australia in 2007, the United Kingdom, and France), voters identifying with challengers were also somewhat more likely to engage with digital politics than supporters of incumbents, but the difference was less marked than in the United States. As a general rule, to the extent that the followers of oppositional major parties are more active online than those of governing parties, this seems to be the case more in majoritarian than in proportional elections. Even in majoritarian democracies, when there are more than two relevant parties, it is often not the bigger one whose supporters engage with online politics the most (as was the case for the Liberal-Democrats in the United Kingdom and the UDF in France). To be sure, these findings do not mean that incumbents are bound to dominate online and that under no circumstances will challengers and their supporters engage more actively on the web. They do highlight, however, that incumbent-challenger dynamics are more relevant in two-party majoritarian democracies, where electoral success is the only pathway to government, than in multiparty proportional competitions, where the link between elections and government composition and policies tends to be weaker. That the United States hosts the purest form of a two-party system and relies most consistently on the first-past-the-post electoral system than any other country included in this study (and almost any other Western democracy, for that matter) explains why US challenger parties and their supporters have had the greatest incentives to engage with online politics but also why this structure of incentives may be less linear and cogent elsewhere.

Empirical research on digital politics may do well to pay more attention to contextual variation in developing theories and interpreting empirical findings. Taking such characteristics into account will allow scholars to develop more refined causal models that account for the fact that political actors and citizens face different incentives depending on how their interests are shaped and constrained by context. Only by comparing countries that differ in theoretically relevant respects can we learn what factors influence the adoption and development of digital media by both political actors and citizens. By contrast, generalizing from developments of internet politics in the United States is rather dangerous because the contextual features and institutional arrangements of American politics are exceptional in many ways, particularly as regards those characteristics that affect the supply and demand of web-based political communication.

Context Matters

The context in which political actors and citizens operate affects the ways in which they perceive and pursue their interests as well as their cultures and self-representations. As a result, context also shapes citizens' and political actors' incentives to adopt communication innovations and adapt to their implications. Institutions are a key contextual feature, and this research has shown that institutions matter in many different ways. In particular, electoral systems, which shape broader visions of democracy, play a key role in how political actors and citizens engage with digital politics.

Electoral systems affect how minor parties and candidates compete in elections, which includes implementing digital tools. In proportional systems, minor parties have a realistic possibility to win some parliamentary seats and, thus, to have a say in government, whereas with majoritarian rules this goal is generally beyond reach. As a result, the gap in website sophistication between richer and poorer parties is appreciably wider when majoritarian rather than proportional systems are employed. Minor parties are more relevant and visible in proportional than majoritarian systems and, as a consequence, their voters are more likely to engage with internet politics when the former rather than the latter rules are in place. These patterns are important not only for the competition and balance of power among parties but also for political equality. They show that digital media do not necessarily reinforce offline inequalities (in terms of both the affordances that can be found on political websites and the engagement among party supporters) but can contribute to bridging them, provided that the institutional context creates congruent incentives. The internet cannot by itself overturn political realities such as the mechanic and psychological effects of electoral systems, but it plays a role in conjunction with them, with different implications on political equality depending on what rules are in place. When parties have strong incentives to compete in the campaign, and their supporters to engage with it, the web affords both of them viable opportunities, and as a result, the outputs, if not the outcomes, of digital politics are bound to be less unequal.

The visions of democracy that are defined by electoral systems are also conducive to differential incentive structures for incumbents and challengers, as we have seen above. In majoritarian democracies, where the link between electoral results and government formation is stronger, voters of some

of the main challenger parties engage more intensely with online politics than supporters of the incumbents. In proportional democracies, elections are a first step that sets the table for further negotiations among parties toward forming a government, and supporters of some governing parties are sometimes just as or even more likely than those of challengers to rely on the internet for campaign information. As a result, the government-opposition dualism affects digital politics much more in majoritarian than in proportional democracies. Once again, thus, the internet does not affect political dynamics uniformly and in isolation, but its electoral adoption marches on tracks laid by political institutions.

Another contextual feature that importantly affects digital politics is the aggregate level of electoral participation (which to a certain degree is a function of institutional arrangements such as electoral norms and compulsory voting). In particular, parties and candidates assemble more informative and professional websites when voter turnout is higher, possibly because they aim to persuade undecided voters (as opposed to mobilizing those that are already committed) through the web. Political actors may be more eager to invest resources on the internet if they have reason to believe that more people will want to get political information online en route to voting. Income inequalities affect online political engagement more in countries where turnout is lower, such as the United States and United Kingdom, and less where it is highest, such as Australia. In the former, majoritarian electoral laws and other arrangements (chiefly registration requirements and voting on a working day) depress electoral participation, particularly among the lower-class strata of the population; in the latter, compulsory voting encourages even the poorest voters to visit the ballot box and to get information in order to do so. Voter turnout thus affects both the intensity of political actors' online efforts and the breadth of income inequalities in voters' digital engagement.

Political culture—in particular, the level of citizen support for the political system—also contributes to shaping the audience of internet politics. When systemic support is relatively high, digital media appeal mostly to citizens who trust political parties and who feel politically efficacious. When, to the contrary, support is low, then the internet by and large becomes an alternative channel that allows the expression of political dissatisfaction. Political culture thus affects the demands that digital media help channel towards political authorities, striking a particular balance in each country between reformists and protesters and between loyalty and voice. This pattern has important

implications on the chances that particular types of political inputs—and the organizations that articulate them—have to find a captive audience online. Given the enormous number of groups that try to attract citizens' attention and mobilize them on a panoply of issues through the web, these findings suggest that the winners and losers in this constant battle will vary significantly depending on the prevailing orientation of political culture in each country.

Digital politics is not separate from other forms of mediated politics, and in this respect paradigms of media-politics relationships are related to how political communication develops online as well. Citizens are more likely to rely on the internet for political information if they are also heavy consumers of political news on the mass media. This symbiotic relationship is particularly strong among voters who rely on mass media institutions that are autonomous, have a strong public service orientation, and provide citizens with ample coverage of public affairs and politics. As a result, digital and mass media are less intertwined in countries where such type of journalism is weaker or less relevant. Online information thus interacts with how the legacy mass media cover political issues and, in particular, how they stimulate interest in public affairs among the public. In the digital age, the mass media thus maintain an important role because they contribute to shaping the demand for political information, which then manifests itself online. In this regard, public service broadcasters can still make a distinctive contribution in educating the public.

Future research on digital politics should continue comparing political systems that differ on theoretically relevant dimensions in order to shed further light on the many ways in which political context and institutions directly and indirectly affect parties' and citizens' online opportunities, interests, incentives, strategies, and behaviors. These patterns are important because they define the actors that engage with internet politics and the reasons why they do so. To some degree, what is done online depends on who does it and with what purpose. Understanding digital politics thus also requires focusing on how political actors are organized.

Organizations Matter

For parties, candidates, and voters, employing digital media for political purposes is not simply an automatic, adaptive strategy in the face of technological

diffusion or environmental pressures. It is not a universal destiny shared by all subjects that interact in a particular political system. Both political organizations and citizens adopt internet tools selectively, i.e., at different levels and with specific purposes. While the web changes many aspects of political organizing and the ways collective action can be pursued (as highlighted, e.g., by Flanagin, Stohl, and Bimber 2006; Chadwick 2007; Karpf 2012), existing arrangements and legacies shape the ways in which digital media are adopted.

Political organizations that are internally inclusive, for instance, are more at ease with digital tools that enable the distribution of contents and promote the participation of supporters. Because there are wide differences across political parties and electoral committees in terms of how much they involve their constituencies in internal decision making, they also respond differently to the challenges and opportunities of internet politics. However, to the extent that many contemporary parties are trying to overcome their crisis of legitimacy by providing members and supporters with process incentives such as primaries and policy referenda, their ability and eagerness to adopt online communication tools may also rise as a result. These two patterns—greater inclusiveness and more intense online engagement—may even corroborate each other by boosting the internal power of digitally savvy midlevel elites and activists, in turn leading to further, more durable organizational changes. Future research should closely scrutinize these patterns by adopting more refined measures of parties' organizational arrangements and preferences than the ones employed here (including, for instance, reliable measures of party membership). Scholars should continue shedding light on the mechanisms that preside over the adoption (or lack thereof) of digital media by parties and candidates. This enterprise will require strong doses of methodological pluralism and, in particular, creative triangulation between quantitative and qualitative techniques of inquiry.

Organizations matter to the extent that they shape their members' and supporters' cultures and preferences. As emerges from the data, both elites and voters of progressive parties, such as greens, socialists, social-democrats, and democrats, have been on average more likely to engage with digital politics than their center-right counterparts and, particularly, Christian-democratic and conservative parties. Moderate parties and their supporters have relied on the internet more than radical ones, both left and right. The most likely explanation for these patterns is that different types of parties attract citizens and elites with different inclinations, which includes their approach to the

affordances of online communication. Another possibility, at least at the elite level, has to do with the patterns by which innovation diffuses, as ideas are often spread through similar organizations in different political contexts more quickly than among different organizations in the same context.

Variations in parties' and citizens' engagement with digital politics thus have to do with political cleavages between left and right as well as between moderate and radical ideologies. Both these political divides are not only conceptually important but may also become consequential in terms of key questions of "who gets what, when, and how" in politics (Lasswell 1936). Scholars should continue scrutinizing how organizational cultures affect the development of internet politics among both political actors and the citizens they court and try to engage, first, by verifying whether the left-right and moderate-radical divides that emerged from this study are replicated across a broader set of countries and within a longer time frame; and, second, by better specifying the causal mechanisms—both organizational and psychological—that may lead to these patterns. A related research challenge involves bridging the hitherto isolated domains of supply and demand of digital politics, as the next paragraph will highlight.

When Supply Meets Demand

Studying simultaneously how both political actors and citizens engage with digital politics has been an important first step toward a fuller understanding of how the internet affects political processes (and vice versa). As we saw in parts II and III, patterns related to inequalities, engagement, and competition often mirror each other with respect to both parties' and candidates' online presence and citizens' use of the internet for political information.

Digital politics is to a certain degree unequal both among political actors (as those who have more resources also provide more sophisticated websites) and among citizens (as those with better education and, thus, greater civic skills are more active online). Also, resource-based inequalities impact online politics more with majoritarian than proportional electoral systems both among parties (as the correlation between financial resources and website sophistication is stronger in the former than the latter) and among voters (as income inequalities significantly affect online information in the United States and the United Kingdom, where first-past-the-post electoral systems are used).

Engagement encourages involvement with digital politics among both political actors and citizens. As regards the former, parties that engage their supporters by allowing them to participate in leader and candidate selection also tend to display more sophisticated websites. With respect to the latter, it is mostly voters who are already interested and engaged in politics that rely on the internet for campaign information. On both the supply and demand sides, elective affinities seem to exist between the internet and political engagement.

Finally, in most of the countries included in this study, the winners and losers of online political competition tend to overlap among both parties and citizens, as can be seen by comparing the results of the website analysis (figures 7.1 and 7.2) and those of the multivariate analyses of voters' online information (table 13.1) with respect to the two main parties in each country. In five elections (Australia 2007, Italy 2006 and 2008, Spain 2008, and the United States 2008), the main progressive parties offered websites that were appreciably more sophisticated than their conservative rivals and, by the same token, supporters of center-left parties were more engaged online than those rooting for center-right forces. In the remaining four elections covered in this study (Australia 2010, France 2007, Germany 2009, and the United Kingdom 2010), no large differences were found between the websites of the two main progressive and conservative parties and, to a similar degree, the multivariate analyses revealed no statistically significant correlations between citizens' online information and their ideological self-placement or identification with one of the two main parties. It thus seems that, in each election year, the sophistication of the major parties' websites was somewhat mirrored by the relative success that each of them achieved in mobilizing its online supporters. In short, winners on the supply side also won on the demand side, whereas when no one clearly prevailed on the former, neither did anyone noticeably beat the competition on the latter.

How can these converging patterns be explained? It may be that party supporters to some degree respond to their organizations' online efforts and are particularly encouraged to engage with internet politics if their favorite party or candidates maintain a more sophisticated digital presence. Conversely, it may also be that political actors strategically anticipate the extent to which their members and identifiers are prepared to engage with online politics at each campaign cycle and fine-tune their level of digital investment accord-

ingly. As a result, parties and candidates whose supporters are more active online may be expected to put greater efforts into their internet platforms than those whose adherents are less involved on the web at a particular moment. These hypotheses may not necessarily be mutually exclusive: virtuous circles of innovative parties and enthusiastic voters as well as vicious circles of lackluster parties and lukewarm supporters may indeed develop. The data employed for this research do not allow us to judge which of these scenarios is more realistic. Future research, however, should address this question in order to understand whether supply drives demand—as politicians and their consultants often wishfully think—or demand determines the impact of supply, as should perhaps be expected in a "pull" medium such as the internet.

When Online Meets Offline

Observing that online politics is integrated with "real" politics may be little more than a truism in contemporary societies where people increasingly rely on digital media in their everyday lives. However, this point often escapes scholars and observers of political communication. The fact that the interactions between these domains went largely unnoticed was partially understandable when the internet began diffusing across Western societies. Indeed, the label of *new media* that designated the web implied a curiosity for its distinctive features rather than an understanding of its interchanges with the offline domain in both its mediated and person-to-person forms of communication. A focus on the web as a distinct environment from anything else we had previously known was also implicit in most of the utopian literature that stressed the medium's intrinsic (and, it was thought, inevitable) transformative potential. (Pessimists, though, emphasized that the "new" media would soon be incorporated by "old" social and political structures and processes, which would thus inescapably deprive the internet of its innovative charge.)

That offline realities contribute to shaping digital politics has emerged in many ways with respect to both the supply and the demand sides that have been studied in this research. Parties and candidates' online presence is strongly affected by their resources, organizational features, and ideology, all of which originate outside of the realm of digital media and to a large extent preexist them. The social and political stratification of citizens' engagement with online politics mirrors patterns of offline political participation,

particularly as regards the role of resources and motivations. To a certain degree, many facets of online political communication among both parties and citizens reflect or reenact offline dynamics.

There is, however, another side of this story, which is best revealed by the positive correlation between online information and offline political discussion among citizens. This pattern suggests that digital messages can ripple outside of the internet because voters who rely on the web for campaign information are also active in person-to-person communication and can multiply offline the messages that they receive online. These considerations also apply to the distinction between digital and mass media, as the internet dovetails with and complements political information on television and newspapers. Philip Howard and Andrew Chadwick (2009: 432) have recently observed that, "while many scholars continue to use analytical categories like television, newspaper, and internet, it is increasingly clear that people who consume political news and information do not make the same distinction." Thus, citizens who engage with digital politics should be conceived no longer as inhabitants of a secluded cyberspace that has little relevance to or interchange with the outside world. Rather, they should be portrayed as active *political bricoleurs* who constantly bridge and integrate computer-mediated, mass-mediated, and face-to-face messages. As a result, whereas distinguishing between these forms of political communication may still be analytically justified, exploring their interactions and mutual dynamics has become a necessity if we are to understand how contemporary elites and citizens exchange contents and maintain relationships in the domain of politics.

These findings, and the overall conceptual changes that they suggest, have important implications for campaigning as well as for citizenship and democracy. The fact that online information dovetails with offline discussion implies that messages that originate online have a much broader potential reach than appears by looking only at the size and sociopolitical characteristics of internet audiences. On the theoretical front, this suggests a rethinking of the reinforcement-only paradigm to which most scholars of digital politics have so far adhered (Bimber and Davis 2003). The hypothesis that interpersonal communication can indirectly increase the reach of online messages beyond the highly motivated citizens who visit political websites should be adequately tested rather than ruled out from the beginning. Consistently, campaigns are increasingly aware that "indirect mobilization through their supporters' social networks is cheaper and more effective than direct mobili-

zation" (Haynes and Pitts 2009: 58). In an analysis of Belgian parties' online efforts, Sara Vissers (2009: 27) similarly suggests that they "no longer only preach to the converted" (as famously noted by Norris 2003), but also "preach through the converted," using digital media to motivate their supporters to persuade their acquaintances. As we saw in part II, political actors have indeed shifted their online priorities from an overwhelming focus on information, documented by previous research, to a more balanced approach that emphasizes both information and participation in similar measures. It may be precisely because they have realized that they can preach to voters both online and offline through their digital supporters that parties and candidates are becoming less cautious in promoting engagement on their web presence.

The interplay between online information and offline discussion also suggests that the internet is more likely to enrich than to weaken democratic citizenship. Harold Lasswell (1941: 81) famously claimed that "democracy depends on talk," and a free and lively exchange of ideas among citizens of diverse viewpoints is often considered an important requirement for a healthy democracy. Whether digital media in and of themselves encourage political discussion or simply attract people who already talk about politics in their social circles or whether, most plausibly, a virtuous circle exists between online information and offline discussion, the evidence shows that the internet does not necessarily exacerbate social or political isolation but appeals to engaged audiences instead. Radical parties and citizens have not rushed—at least not more so than their moderate counterparts—to take advantage of the unfiltered echo chamber for political extremism that some feared the web would turn into. The type of "talking citizen" that predominantly engages with digital politics is obviously not representative of the average or median voter. The internet cannot change the fact that most individuals in contemporary Western democracies are rather uninterested in politics, act like rational cognitive misers, and thus tend to engage with politics only to the extent that scandals, emergencies, or high-stakes events such as elections warrant doing so (Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Schudson 1998). We should not forget that, even in the United States, where digital politics is most pervasive, and even in the exceptional campaign of 2008, which arguably saw online electioneering finally blossom, the majority of citizens got no campaign information through the web and only a few more than two in five did. In other countries, citizens who somewhat engaged with politics online were, at best, robust minorities of between one-third and one-tenth of the population.

However unrepresentative of the whole electorate, the digital citizen is nonetheless more engaged and active than the prototypical voter in the mass media age because the communication environment now encourages—and almost requires—constant integration among, and contribution to, different flows of messages and communities. Sonia Livingstone (2006: 244) has observed that "the evocative image that captured, and worried, the public imagination is no longer that of the immobile viewer sitting on the sofa silently staring at the screen. Rather, it is of multi-tasking in front of the computer, creating as well as receiving messages, networked online as well as embedded in noisy worlds of interaction offline." As Bruce Bimber and colleagues (2012: 25) have argued, the most important implication of this constant cross-media integration and convergence "is not necessarily that greater use of these technologies causes people to participate more frequently, but that the context for participation has changed."

Thanks to these developments, the internet allows the creative expression of multiple forms of citizenship and the bridging of previously separate domains of social and political activity. As digital media increasingly constitute the informational backbone of our lives and of the organizations that pursue collective action in our polities, research on internet politics should expand into the interactions between the web and other domains of politics and communication. Studying digital politics in conjunction with politics writ large, both mediated and unmediated, will require not only broader datasets (such as cross-country surveys containing items that capture the complexity of both online and offline information and engagement) but also a conceptual reappraisal of the boundaries and intersections between different domains of political communication.

Tear Down These Walls

One of the most relevant implications of the findings presented here is that research on digital politics needs to be more integrated with research on political communication and participation writ large. Bridges must be built between our understanding of the online and offline domains because this is by and large the way in which citizens and elites now engage with politics.

In the aftermath of the 2004 US presidential election, I interviewed Josh Ross, Silicon Valley entrepreneur and director of internet strategy for the

Democratic nominee John Kerry. Drawing a parallel between business and campaigns, Ross argued that, just as companies had moved from online-only ventures to merging "clicks and mortar" to fully integrating the internet in all their operations, so would campaigns:

> The Kerry campaign had the first and last internet team, so to speak. The big evolution that you will see in the future is that, instead of having one [online] operation that is being housed under one person and one department in a campaign, the campaigns will begin to look for members of their communication staff that have experience in online media, and people in the field are going to be looking for organizers that have internet skills, and so a lot of the activities that we housed under the internet team this time will be housed under different teams in the future, as the departments of the campaign begin to embrace the technology. . . . The most intelligent people in the field are asking themselves how they can develop ways in which technology helps a campaign, not so much in a high-in-the-sky way, but in a similar fashion to how so many American businesses are beginning to use technology for their operations even though they are not technology-oriented. (Vaccari 2008: 662)

Ross's predictions turned out to be quite accurate. By 2008, the Obama campaign had built a structure that distributed and integrated digital media across all traditional campaign divisions—chiefly fundraising, communication, and field organization—albeit with different degrees of attrition and success. The web was not "high in the sky" any longer but had become a backbone that helped conduct various campaign activities, particularly as regards data management. This trend seems to have further developed in the 2012 presidential election, as digital media have become so ubiquitous in citizens' and candidates' repertoires of action that most of the innovations occurred at the back rather than the front end of campaign communications. Despite the important differences between digital politics in the United States and other Western democracies—which should be clear to readers at this point of the book—research on internet politics would do well to follow a similar trail. In a sense, just as high-profile campaigns stopped employing the internet as a standalone communication channel after the 2004 elections, it could be argued that we should no longer do research on digital politics, alone and per se. Disciplinary walls between internet politics and the mainstream of political communication and political sociology, among others, should be torn down.

Future research should look less at the internet in isolation and more at the interplay and mutual influences between different communication outlets, including not only the mass media but also informal person-to-person exchanges among citizens as well as the ground wars mounted by parties and campaign committees. Political communication, in other words, should be seen and studied as a multifaceted environment where messages from multiple sources are continuously exchanged, merged, and reframed by various actors. Accordingly, crucial questions of media effects and political participation should also be seen under a different light that reaches beyond the dominant, and still useful, paradigms of contemporary political science research. If we narrowly understand media effects as the impact of broadcast messages on citizens' political information, attitudes, and behaviors, for instance, such effects may indeed appear to be minimal in the face of increased media choice resulting in greater (potential for) selective exposure. If, however, we look at the broader picture of the many sources and messages that circulate in contemporary political communication environments, then it is hard to miss that citizens can now be influenced in many more better-refined ways than in the simpler catchall campaigns of yesteryear.

Voters now have more and more viable avenues to influence one another, perhaps by relaying (mass or digital) media contents that they have previously been exposed to, leading to novel types of two-step flows of communication that can occur both through interpersonal communication and via the multiple avenues afforded by email, mobile messaging, and social media. To be sure, this complexity is much harder to measure and model for social scientists (and to channel for political elites) than in the past, but this does not mean that the political attitudes and behaviors of contemporary citizens are overall less affected by political communication than they used to be. Similarly, if we understand political participation as occurring solely within party, campaign, or movement organizations and if we look at its varieties (e.g., conventional and unconventional) as somewhat alternative to each other, then we lose sight of the many ways in which old and new political organizations and their supporters are integrating different modes of political engagement in their everyday activities. That political actions of many kinds—often aimed more at expressive than instrumental goals—occur constantly at the intersection between digital media, mass media, and people's social lives does not necessarily mean that citizens will participate more, or more effectively. It does, however, imply that people's definition of what it means to engage with

politics and their understanding of how it can—and, perhaps, should—be done have changed substantially compared to the standard definitions employed in political science research.

To capture these and many other complexities and opportunities in contemporary political communication, we need rigorous empirical research that captures the role and implications of all media—digital, analog, and personal—and of their uses by both elites and citizens, organizations and individuals. We need comparative analyses to better understand the role of context, including how different media structures provide different opportunities for interaction between politicians and voters. We need to place behavioral research questions in the broader context of how contemporary citizens engage with politics and how elites try to channel the seemingly endless flow generated by these interactions.

If we are to fully understand how both elites and citizens engage in contemporary politics, we cannot be content with simply adding digital media to the picture of political communication that we began drawing almost one century ago. We must start drawing a new picture—framed by the cumulative knowledge we have built over time—that aims at representing all channels, all types of actors, and all types of activities, interchanges, and contents that inhabit the contemporary political communication environment. What the picture will look like is still hard to gauge, but we will not know until we start preparing a bigger canvas, a wider variety of brushes, and a richer color palette. The drawing board awaits us.

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Appendix

List of Website Observations Conducted throughout the Research

Table A.1 provides information on all the observations conducted on party and candidate websites in the seven countries included in this study from 2006 until 2010. The table specifies what type of election was taking place (or whether it was a nonelectoral period; the "invisible primary" stage in the United States was considered a nonelectoral period), in what months the observations were conducted (unless otherwise specified, websites were coded in the first two weeks of the month), and how many websites were coded.

Table A.1. Calendar of Website Coding

Year	Country	Election	Observations	*N*
2006	Italy	Parliamentary	February, March, April	81
2007	France	Presidential	March, April, May	42
2007	France	Parliamentary	June (first and second half)	19
2007	Germany	None	February	6
2007	United Kingdom	None	February	6
2007	Italy	None	February	15
2007	Spain	None	February	7
2007	Australia	None	March	7
2007	Australia	Parliamentary	November	19
2007	United States	None	March, July, September	56
2007	United States	Presidential	November, December	42
2008	France	None	February	11
2008	Germany	None	February	7
2008	United Kingdom	None	March	8
2008	Spain	Parliamentary	March	12
2008	Italy	Parliamentary	February, April	24
2008	United States	Presidential	January through November (all months)	97
2009	France	European	April, June	26
2009	Germany	European	April, June	14
2009	United Kingdom	European	April, June	16
2009	Italy	European	April, June	28
2009	Spain	European	April, June	20
2009	Germany	Parliamentary	September	14
2010	United Kingdom	Parliamentary	February, May	23
2010	Australia	Parliamentary	August	20
TOTAL				620

List of Parties and Candidates Whose Websites Were Analyzed

Below is the full list of the parties and candidates whose websites were coded between 2006 and 2010. Their names are in their native language. Numbers of observations are reported in parentheses.

Australia: Australian Democrats (3), Australian Greens (3), Australian Labor Party (3), Family First (3), Liberal Party (3), Nationals (3), One Nation (3), Bob Brown (2), Carers Alliance (2), Christian Democratic Party (2), Country Liberal Party (2), Tony Abbott (1), Jodeen Carney (1), Citizens Electoral Council (1), Climate Change Coalition (1), Steve Fielding (1), John Howard (1), Kevin Rudd (1), John-Paul Langbroek (1), Liberal Democratic Party (1), Liberal National Party (1), Mark Vaile (1), Pauline's United Australia Party (1), Secular Party of Australia (1), Socialist Alliance (1), Socialist Equality Party (1), Warren Truss (1), What Women Want (1).

France: Front National (7), Parti Radicale de Gauche (7), Parti Socialiste (7), Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (7), Mouvement Démocrate (5), Mouvement pour la France (5), Parti Communiste Français (5), Les Verts (5), Nouveau Centre (4), Union pour la Démocratie Française (4), Désirs d'Avenir (3), François Bayrou (3), Nicolas Sarkozy (3), Ségolène Royal (3), Arlette Laguillier (2), Dominique Voynet (2), Europe Ecologie (2), Front de Gauche (2), Jean-Marie Le Pen (2), José Bové (2), Libertas (2), Lutte Ouvrière (2), Marie-George Buffet (2), Olivier Besancenot (2), Parti de la France (2), Philippe de Villers (2), Debout la République (1), Fréderic Nihous (1), Gérard Schivardi (1), Nicolas Dupont-Aignan (1), Nicolas Miguet (1), Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (1).

Germany: Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands (5), Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern (5), Die Linke (5), Freie Demokratische Partei (5), Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (5), Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (5), Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands (4), Gregor Gysi (1), Renate Kunast (1), Oskar Lafontaine (1), Angela Merkel (1), Frank-Walter Steinmeier (1), Jürgen Trittin (1), Guido Westerwelle (1).

Italy: Italia dei Valori (8), Lega Nord (8), Unione di Centro (8), Movimento per l'Autonomia (7), Partito dei Comunisti Italiani (6), Partito della Rifondazione Comunista (6), Partito Radicale (5), Alleanza Nazionale (4), Democratici di Sinistra (4), Fiamma Tricolore (4), Forza Italia (4), La Destra (4), La Margherita (4), Partito Democratico (4), Pensionati (4), Romano Prodi (4), Rosa nel Pugno (4), Unione Democratici per l'Europa (4), L'Ulivo (4), Verdi (4), Alternativa Sociale (3), Democrazia Cristiana (3), Fronte Sociale Nazionale (3), Movimento Repubblicani Europei (3), Nuovo PSI (3), Partito Comunista dei Lavoratori (3), Popolo della Libertà (3), Partito Repubblicano Italiano (3), Lista Rauti (3), Socialisti Democratici Italiani (3), L'Unione (3), Forza Nuova (2), Partito Socialista (2), Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà (2), Aborto? No grazie (1), Grilli parlanti (1), La Sinistra-l'Arcobaleno (1), L'Autonomia (1), Lista Comunista (1), Partito Liberale (1), Per il bene comune (1), Sinistra Critica (1), Unione Democratica per i Consumatori (1).

Spain: Convergencia i Unió (4), Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (4), Iniciativa Catalunya Verds (4), Izquierda Unida (4), Partido Nacionalista Vasco (4), Partido Popular (4), Partido Socialista Obrero Esapanol (4), Bloque Nactionalista Gallego (3), Coalicion Canaria (3), Unión Progreso y Democracia (2), Gaspar Llamazares (1), Mariano Rajoy (1), José Luis Rodriguez Zapatero (1).

United Kingdom: Conservatives (6), Green Party (6), Labour (6), Liberal-Democrats (6), Scottish National Party (6), United Kingdom Independence Party (6), British National Party (4), Plaid Cymru (4), Nick Clegg (2), Democratic Unionist Party (2), Sinn Fein (2), David Cameron (1), Caroline Lucas (1), Lord Pearson of Rannoch (1).

United States: Democratic National Committee (16), John McCain (16), Barack Obama (16), Republican National Committee (16), Hillary Clinton (11), Green Party (10), Ron Paul (10), Ralph Nader (9), Mike Gravel (8), Mike Huckabee (8), Mitt Romney (7), Bob Barr (6), Joe Biden (6), Chris Dodd (6), John Edwards (6), Rudolph Giuliani (6), Duncan Hunter (6), Dennis Kucinich (6), Bill Richardson (6), Fred Thompson (5), Tom Tancredo (5), Sam Brownback (3), Wesley Clark (3), Jim Gilmore (2), Tommy Thompson (2).

Definition of Website Latent Dimensions through Principal Components Analysis

Once all the variables measuring website characteristics had been coded, the main issues to resolve in order to identify latent dimensions in the corpus were the presence of nonindependent observations (because the same units were coded at different time points), the large number of variables (96 were included in the original coding frame) compared to the total number of units (620), and the categorical nature of most variables (all but five dichotomous), which precluded standard applications of factor and principal components analysis.

In order to address the first issue—nonindependent observations—I decided to focus this part of the analysis on a portion of the corpus in which observations were independent. This was done by selecting a subsample that included the last observation of most recent national elections in all seven countries,[1] namely the 2008 presidential elections in the United States ($N=20$), the 2009 European elections in France (14), Italy (16) and Spain (10), the 2009 federal elections in Germany (14), the 2010 general elections in the United Kingdom (13), and the 2010 federal elections in Australia (20), for a total of 107 units. An alternative strategy would have been to apply a multilevel statistical technique to the whole corpus that would have allowed accounting for the spatial and temporal nesting of units. However, the dataset included too few cases in at least some relevant geographic and temporal groupings to appropriately conduct multilevel analyses.

While the choice to focus on a smaller subsample of independent units allowed resolution of the nonindependence issue, the numerical consistency of this subset of units (107) was too small to include all variables (96) in a standard exploratory analysis. Instead, I conducted a series of exploratory analyses based on various subsets of variables, which allowed generation of some preliminary hypotheses regarding the structure of the data and the variables representing it.

To address the issue of the categorical nature of the variables, I tested the hypotheses developed in the exploratory stage within a latent trait model framework that allowed accommodation of the categorical nature of the data (Jöreskog and Sörbom 1979). This part of the analysis was conducted with the LISREL 8.52 statistical package (Jöreskog and Sörbom 1996). Because the purpose of this investigation was not to test causal hypotheses but to identify the latent structure of the data and reduce a large number of variables to a more manageable set of dimensions, I employed principal components analysis (PCA) rather than factor analysis.

Principal components analysis was executed at two stages, the first of which aimed at determining the optimal number of components. To do so, I ran the analysis without specifying the number of components and evaluated the eigenvalues for the resulting components. Based on the Kaiser criterion, which suggests excluding components with eigenvalues whose value is lower than 1, six components should have been

included. However, a look at the distribution of the eigenvalues suggested that the Cattell scree test was a more appropriate method in this case. To apply the Cattell scree test one must plot the components and their eigenvalues and then establish the number of factors based on the point where the decline in eigenvalues becomes less steep—the elbow in the curve (see Dunteman 1989). As can be seen from figure A.1, this point can be located in correspondence of either the second or third component, while the figure provides minimal support for a solution with more than three components, as the line becomes flat after the third.

Since both a two- and a three-component solution would be legitimate based on the Cattell scree test, I opted for the solution with three components for various reasons: that it is a more conservative and balanced compromise between the Kaiser and Cattell criteria; that, as explained in chapter 2, most studies of political websites have identified three broad categories of functions; and that, given the variables that were found to represent the dimensions identified in both solutions, the semantic interpretation of the three-component solution was more comprehensible and meaningful than that of the two-component solution.

The second stage of the PCA aimed at confirming the hypotheses developed regarding the structure of the data. A confirmatory PCA was thus run specifying the number of components as three. Table A.2 shows the results of the confirmatory PCA with three dimensions. As explained in greater detail in chapter 2, the first component was interpreted as *information*, the second as *delivery*, and the third as *participation*. Such categories are largely consistent with those employed in most other researchers' coding frames.

Meta-analysis of Seven Coding Frames and Integration with PCA Results

The meta-analysis of coding frames was conducted with two goals: to increase the number of variables articulating the three dimensions identified by the PCA and to make the methodology and findings of this research as comparable as possible with those of other relevant studies in the field.

The coding frames to be meta-analyzed were selected based on various criteria: visibility and diffusion of the publications where they appeared; relevance of the scholars that produced them; diversity in theoretical approach; geographic reach of the

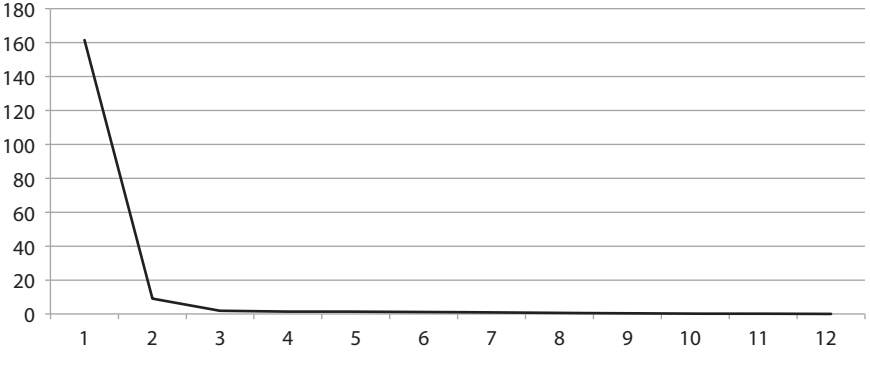

Figure A.1. Scree plot of eigenvalues in exploratory PCA.

Table A.2. Results and Interpretation of Confirmatory PCA ($N = 107$)

	Components		
Variables	1 (Information)	2 (Delivery)	3 (Participation)
Time required to answer an issue question via email	1		
Podcasts	.649		
Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)	.570		
Audio clips	.433		
Average emails sent weekly		.945	
Foreign language translations		.440	
Interactive maps		.426	
Lack of missing/under construction pages		.386	
Offline distribution of online-gathered materials			.686
Possibility to comment on pages			.649
Social networking tool (or link to Facebook, etc.)			.584
Online polls			.465
Eigenvalues	161.63	9.04	1.77
Percent variance explained	90.41	5.06	.99

Note: Coefficients below .350 were excluded.

countries analyzed; and originality of the coding frames.[2] This procedure led to the selection of seven coding frames, which were employed in the following studies: Gibson et al. 2003; Norris 2003; Farmer and Fender 2005; Lusoli and Ward 2005; Foot and Schneider 2006; Gulati and Williams 2007; Latimer 2009.

In order to integrate the meta-analysis with the findings of the PCA, the categories used by other scholars had to be harmonized with the three dimensions that emerged from the analysis: information, participation, and delivery. Thus, when scholars had used more than three categories to classify website characteristics, I conflated them into these three dimensions. As a result, Gibson et al.'s (2003) "campaigning," "participation," and "resource generation" were treated as participation; Foot and Schneider's (2006) "connecting," which involved links, was treated as information, while "involving" and "mobilizing" were classified as participation, as were Gulati and Williams's (2007) "engagement" and "mobilization." Latimer's (2009) "usability" and "transparency" were both considered as "delivery." When I found disagreements in the ways in which different scholars had classified the same variable, I resorted to majority rule among their stipulations. Furthermore, I excluded variables that I coded but which were absent from all seven coding frames included in the meta-analysis, apart from those that the PCA had identified as representing one of the three dimensions. Finally, I also included the variable "Time required to answer a volunteer pledge by email" as part of the participation index because of its similarity to the variable "Time required to answer an issue question via email," which has been included as a result of the PCA, and because it provides important information regarding a key component of participation—email interaction with prospective volunteers (which is why both email variables have been analyzed at length in chapters 5 and 8). Tables A.3a, A.3b, and A.3c summarize the results of the meta-analysis.

Table A.3a. Meta-analysis of Seven Coding Frames: Information

Variable	Farmer and Fender 2005	Foot and Schneider 2006	Gulati and Williams 2007	Gibson et al. 2003	Latimer 2009	Lusoli and Ward 2005	Norris 2003
Leader biography and profile		Informing	Content	Information provision	Content	Information	Information
Comparisons with opponents' record and platform		Connecting		Campaigning	Content	Information	
Data and statistics on public policies		Informing					
Speeches and statements	Information	Informing		Information provision	Content	Information	Information
Frequently Asked Questions[a]	Technical			Information provision			
Endorsements		Connecting			Content	Information	
Information on electoral law and voting			Engagement	Information provision		Information	
External links	Networking	Connecting		Networking	Content		Information
News updates[b]	Information	Informing	Content		Content		
Pages for age groups (youth, etc.)							Information

Pages for voters in different geographic areas							Information
Pages for identity groups (minorities, etc.)							Information
Pages for interest groups (business, etc.)							Information
Podcasts[a]							
Audio clips[a]			Content	Delivery	Content	Sophistication	Information
Video clips		Informing	Content	Delivery	Content	Sophistication	Information
Issue positions/ platform/manifesto	Information	Informing	Content	Information provision	Content	Information	Information
Press clippings	Information						
Campaign/party organizational chart	Networking			Information provision	Interactivity		Information
Time required to answer an issue question via email[c]							
Values and ideology				Information provision			Information

[a]Based on PCA results.

[b]News updates were assessed as follows: no daily update = 0 points; one or two = 1; three or four = 2; five to seven = 3; more than seven = 4.

[c]Based on PCA results. Time required to answer an issue question via email was assessed as follows: no answer = 0 points; one week or more = 1; two to four business days = 2; one day = 3.

Table A.3b. Meta-analysis of Seven Coding Frames: Participation

Variable	Farmer and Fender 2005	Foot and Schneider 2006	Gulati and Williams 2007	Gibson et al. 2003	Latimer 2009	Lusoli and Ward 2005	Norris 2003
Events calendar	Campaigning	Involving	Engagement	Information provision	Interactivity	Information	Information
Blog			Engagement				
Campaign contacts	Networking	Involving	Content	Participation	Interactivity	Information	Communication
Offline distribution of online-gathered materials[a]		Mobilizing	Mobilization	Campaigning		Engagement	
Online distribution of campaign materials	Technical	Mobilizing		Campaigning		Engagement	
Discussion forums, chat rooms				Participation	Interactivity	Engagement	
Event-organizing tool (or link to MeetUp, etc.)	Recruiting	Involving	Mobilization				
Social networking tool (or link to Facebook, etc.)[a]							
Solicitation of questions via web or email	Technical			Participation			Communication
Email sign-up	Campaigning	Involving	Engagement	Campaigning	Interactivity	Engagement	Communication
Voter registration, absentee ballot request form	Participation	Connecting		Campaigning	Interactivity	Engagement	

Volunteer sign-up	Recruiting	Involving	Engagement	Resource generation	Interactivity	Engagement	Communication
Downloadable campaign materials	Technical	Mobilizing	Mobilization	Campaigning			
Possibility to comment on pages[a]		Involving		Participation	Interactivity		
Online fundraising	Recruiting	Involving	Engagement	Resource generation	Interactivity	Engagement	Communication
"Send this page to a friend"		Mobilizing	Mobilization		Interactivity	Engagement	
Online polls[a]		Involving	Engagement	Participation	Interactivity		
Media contacting tools	Participation	Mobilizing	Mobilization		Interactivity		
Time required to answer a volunteer pledge by email[b]							
Online gadget store	Campaigning		Mobilization	Resource generation	Interactivity		Communication
RSS feeds			Engagement				

[a]Based on PCA results.

[b]By analogy with PCA results. Time required to answer a volunteer pledge via email was assessed as follows: no answer = 0 points; one week or more = 1; two to four business days = 2; one day = 3.

Table A.3c Meta-analysis of Seven Coding Frames: Delivery

Variable	Farmer and Fender 2005	Foot and Schneider 2006	Gulati and Williams 2007	Gibson et al. 2003	Latimer 2009	Lusoli and Ward 2005	Norris 2003
Accessibility with different browsers				Delivery			
Cartoons and animations	Technical						
Lack of missing/under construction pages[a]							
Date when last update appeared[b]				Delivery			
Privacy policy	Technical			Information provision	Transparency	Sophistication	
Site map	Technical			Delivery	Usability		
Interactive maps[a]					Content		
Average emails sent weekly[c]							
Navigation toolbar in all pages				Delivery			
Internal search engine	Technical			Delivery	Usability		Communication
Live-streaming of events	Technical	Involving		Delivery			
Pictures and graphics outside the banner	Technical	Involving	Engagement	Delivery	Content	Sophistication	
Moving objects				Delivery			
Return to home page from all internal pages	Technical			Delivery			
Foreign language translations[a]	Technical		Mobilization	Delivery	Usability		Information

[a]Based on PCA results.

[b]Date when last update appeared was evaluated as follows: one month ago = 0; two weeks ago = 1; in the last week = 2; in the last two days = 3; within the last 24 hours = 4.

[c]Based on PCA results. Average emails sent weekly was evaluated as follows: no emails = 0 points; less than one = 1; one = 2; two = 3; three or more = 4.

Characteristics of National Election Surveys Employed in This Study

The 2008 American National Election Studies,[3] a collaborative effort supervised by Stanford University and the University of Michigan, included a postelectoral survey that was conducted through face-to-face interviews on a sample of 2,102 respondents. The target population constitutes English-speaking or Spanish-speaking US citizens of voting age residing in the forty-eight contiguous US states and the District of Columbia. To achieve a sample representative of this population, a five-stage sampling strategy was developed that disproportionately allocated the sample to areas of the country with high concentrations of Latinos or African Americans. To conduct the analyses reported in part III of this book, the data were weighted to represent the target population and to adjust for attrition from the preelection to the postelection survey.

The 2007 Australian Election Study and the 2010 Australian Election Study,[4] conducted by the Australian National University, were implemented through self-administered postelectoral questionnaires sent to a representative sample of the voting-age population. In 2007 the questionnaires were sent and returned by mail only, while in 2010 participants were given the alternative to complete the questionnaire online. The 2007 survey has a sample of 1,873 respondents, while the 2010 survey had an initial sample of 2,003 respondents, which was augmented with a "top up" survey of 211 respondents sampled at two stages—telephone recruitment and online questionnaire completion—in order to address underrepresentation of younger enrolled voters in the original sample. No weighting variable was provided in the 2007 data, whereas analysis of the 2010 data was conducted using weights by gender, age, state or territory of residency, and vote choice.

The 2010 British Election Study,[5] conducted by the University of Essex and the University of Texas in Dallas, included a postelectoral in-person survey (complemented by a mail-back questionnaire) that consists of face-to-face interviews on a sample of 3,075 respondents. To conduct the analyses, the data were weighted with the postelection cross-section weight provided by BES.

The 2007 French Election Study,[6] conducted by the Centre de recherches politiques de Sciences Po (CEVIPOF), was carried out after the runoff of the presidential election. Interviews were conducted by phone on a sample of 4,006 respondents enrolled in voter lists and representative of the voting-age population. The data were weighted to represent the main sociodemographic characteristics of the voting-age population and the results of the first and second round of the 2007 presidential elections.

The 2009 German Longitudinal Election Study,[7] supervised by the German Society for Electoral Studies, was conducted after the general elections through face-to-face interviews with a sample of 2,115 respondents, representative of the voting-age population. In the analyses, the data were weighted to represent the population residing in the whole country, which is particularly relevant given the lasting social and political differences between the western and eastern parts of Germany.

The 2006 and 2008 Italian National Election Studies,[8] overseen by the Itanes inter-university consortium, were both conducted after the general elections. The 2006 survey

consists of face-to-face interviews on a sample of 2,011 respondents whose names were listed in electoral rolls; the sample was randomly selected based on a three-stage probabilistic design. The 2008 survey was conducted through phone interviews on a sample of 3,000 respondents who were randomly selected within strata representing the distribution in the voting-age population of gender, age, and education and within layers defined by a cluster analysis based on the results of the 2006 general elections by geopolitical area and size of the area of residence.

Finally, the 2008 Spanish electoral survey,[9] conducted by the Centro de Investigaciones Sociologicas, consists of postelectoral face-to-face interviews with a sample of 6,083 respondents, representative of the voting-age population. The data were weighted to represent the distribution of the population in the whole Spanish territory.

The data reported in figure 9.2 come from the Standard Eurobarometer 71.1,[10] conducted in the aftermath of the European Parliament elections by TNS Opinion & Social through face-to-face interviews in the twenty-seven European Union Member States, the three candidate countries (Croatia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and Turkey) as well as the Turkish Cypriot Community in the part of the country not controlled by the government of the Republic of Cyprus. Sample sizes are 3,095 (France), 3,280 (Italy), 4,303 (Germany), 2,569 (Spain), and 3,273 (United Kingdom).

Question Wording of the Dependent Variables in National Election Surveys

Listed below is the wording (or an English translation) of the questions in national election surveys that have been used as dependent variables in part III of this book, as well as the response categories that have been considered as 0 and 1 values in the logistic regression models.

2008 American National Election Studies: "Did you read, watch, or listen to any information about the campaign for President on the Internet?" 0=No; 1=Yes.

2007 Australian Election Study and 2010 Australian Election Study: "Did you make use of the internet at all to get news or information about the [2007/2010] Federal election?" 0=Have internet access but didn't use it for election information/Don't have access to the internet; 1= Yes, many times/Yes, on several occasions/Yes, once or twice.

2010 British Election Study: "How much did you use the internet to get or exchange information about the recent general election?" 0=Not at all; 1=A great deal/A fair amount/Not very much.

2007 French Election Study: "To get information on political issues, which is the medium that you use more often? And the second one?" Respondents could choose among television, radio, internet, national newspapers, regional newspapers, free newspapers, other, none. 0=Internet not mentioned as either first or second source of information; 1=Internet mentioned as either first or second source of information.

(*Continued on page 238.*)

Table A.4. Results of Logistic Regression Models Predicting Internet Use for Political Information in Australia, 2007 and 2010

	2007				2010			
	Coeff.	s.e.	Sig.	Exp(B)	Coeff.	s.e.	Sig.	Exp(B)
Gender (male)	**.411**	**.164**	**.012**	**1.508**	**.338**	**.126**	**.007**	**1.402**
Age	**–.049**	**.006**	**.000**	**.952**	**–.058**	**.004**	**.000**	**.944**
Education	**.288**	**.059**	**.000**	**1.334**	**.250**	**.048**	**.000**	**1.283**
Urban density	.084	.060	.163	1.088	**.157**	**.051**	**.002**	**1.170**
Income	.000	.018	.987	1.000	.005	.012	.657	1.005
Religious attendance	.003	.047	.949	1.003	**–.097**	**.038**	**.011**	**.908**
Interest in politics	**1.828**	**.445**	**.000**	**6.222**	**1.719**	**.337**	**.000**	**5.577**
Sense of efficacy	.443	.346	.200	1.557	**.653**	**.244**	**.008**	**1.920**
Political trust (government)	–.302	.252	.231	.740	.033	.200	.871	1.033
Ideology (right-left)	**1.072**	**.444**	**.016**	**2.921**	.386	.351	.272	1.471
Party identification (Liberals/Nationals = ref.)								
Labor	–.320	.210	.127	.726	–.143	.154	.355	.867
Greens	.351	.333	.292	1.421	–.032	.268	.904	.968
Others	.708	.531	.182	2.030	–.016	.408	.968	.984
None	–.083	.251	.742	.920	–.206	.195	.291	.814
Political discussion	.443	.375	.237	1.558	**1.840**	**.281**	**.000**	**6.294**
Participation in rallies	**1.106**	**.493**	**.025**	**3.023**	–.076	.493	.878	.927
Working for parties/candidates	.332	.352	.344	1.394	**1.337**	**.331**	**.000**	**3.808**
Reading political news	**1.027**	**.315**	**.001**	**2.793**	.413	.247	.095	1.511
Watching political news	.448	.349	.198	1.566	.350	.255	.169	1.419
Constant	**–3.354**	**.570**	**.000**	**.035**	**–2.610**	**.415**	**.000**	**.074**
N	1294				1605			
Nagelkerke R^2	.321				.394			

Note: Significant coefficients ($p \leq .05$) are reported in bold.

2009 German Longitudinal Election Study: "On how many days of the week did you use the Internet to inform yourself about political parties and the federal election during the election campaign?" 0 = Not at all; 1 = 1 day/2 days/3 days/4 days/5 days/6 days/7 days.

2006 Italian National Election Studies: "Now I'm going to read a list of things some people happened to do during the last electoral campaign. For each of them, please tell me if you happened to do it or not: Visiting internet websites about the elections." 0 = No; 1 = Yes.

2008 Italian National Election Studies: "Did you happen to do any of the following during the last electoral campaign? Visiting internet websites about the elections." 0 = No; 1 = Yes.

2008 Spanish electoral survey: "Did you follow or get any information on the election campaign through the internet?" 0 = No; 1 = Yes.

Table A.5. Results of Logistic Regression Model Predicting Choice of the Internet as One of the Two Main Sources of Campaign Information in France, 2007

	Coeff.	s.e.	Sig.	Exp(B)
Gender (male)	**.416**	**.102**	**.000**	**1.515**
Race (white)	–.192	.177	.280	.826
Age	**–.046**	**.004**	**.000**	**.955**
Education	**.086**	**.023**	**.000**	**1.090**
Urban density	**.076**	**.035**	**.029**	**1.079**
Income	.015	.033	.639	1.016
Religious attendance	–.099	.051	.054	.906
Interest in politics	.431	.230	.061	1.539
Sense of efficacy	**–.378**	**.119**	**.001**	**.685**
Political trust (parties)	–.203	.110	.064	.816
Ideology (right-left)	–.521	.330	.114	.594
Party identification (UMP = ref.)				
Radical left parties	.088	.245	.718	1.092
PS	.223	.196	.257	1.250
Verts	.121	.263	.646	1.128
UDF	.320	.176	.069	1.377
Front national	.133	.244	.586	1.142
Others	–.164	.462	.722	.848
None	.153	.217	.481	1.165
Political discussion	–.232	.254	.362	.793
Watching political news	.013	.024	.595	1.013
Constant	–.363	.447	.417	.696
N	2862			
Nagelkerke R^2	.213			

Note: Significant coefficients ($p \leq .05$) are reported in bold.

2009 Eurobarometer: "And more precisely, if you had to choose between the following means of getting information about politics and political matters, what would you prefer? Firstly? And secondly?" Respondents could choose among: newspapers, written magazines, television, radio, and the internet. 0 = Internet not mentioned as either first or second source of information; 1 = Internet mentioned as either first or second source of information.

Results of Multivariate Logistic Regression Models Predicting Use of the Internet for Political Information in Each Country

The tables A.4–A.10 (pages 237–242) report the results of the multivariate logistic regression models predicting use of the internet for political information in each country. Statistically significant coefficients ($p \leq .05$) are shown in bold.

Table A.6. Results of Logistic Regression Model Predicting Internet Use for Political Information in Germany, 2009

	Coeff.	s.e.	Sig.	Exp(B)
Gender (male)	**.379**	**.162**	**.019**	**1.460**
Age	**–.045**	**.006**	**.000**	**.956**
Education	**.337**	**.076**	**.000**	**1.401**
Urban density	–.005	.057	.929	.995
Income	.034	.043	.426	1.035
Religious attendance	–.002	.070	.972	.998
Interest in politics	.261	.396	.510	1.298
Sense of efficacy	**2.140**	**.428**	**.000**	**8.498**
Ideology (right-left)	–.062	.563	.912	.940
Party identification (CDU/CSU = ref.)				
SPD	.181	.258	.482	1.199
Greens	.371	.336	.269	1.449
Linke	.010	.392	.980	1.010
FDP	–.078	.310	.801	.925
Other	**1.541**	**.635**	**.015**	**4.671**
None	–.433	.248	.081	.648
Participation in rallies	**1.198**	**.253**	**.000**	**3.312**
Working for parties/candidates	–.362	.336	.282	.696
Reading political news	**.343**	**.085**	**.000**	**1.409**
Watching political news	**.048**	**.019**	**.011**	**1.049**
Constant	**–2.695**	**.567**	**.000**	**.068**
N	1317			
Nagelkerke R^2	.391			

Note: Significant coefficients ($p \leq .05$) are reported in bold.

Table A.7. Results of Logistic Regression Models Predicting Internet Use for Political Information in Italy, 2006 and 2008

	2006				2008			
	Coeff.	s.e.	Sig.	Exp(B)	Coeff.	s.e.	Sig.	Exp(B)
Gender (male)	–.009	.292	.974	.991	.324	.181	.073	1.383
Age	**–.025**	**.011**	**.029**	**.975**	**–.043**	**.008**	**.000**	**.958**
Education	**.605**	**.153**	**.000**	**1.831**	**.304**	**.077**	**.000**	**1.356**
Urban density	**.114**	**.050**	**.023**	**1.121**	.086	.066	.191	1.090
Professional status (inactive = ref.)								
Self-employed	.255	.519	.623	1.291	**.824**	**.316**	**.009**	**2.280**
Employee	.445	.449	.322	1.561	**.630**	**.244**	**.010**	**1.878**
Student	.464	.546	.395	1.591	.487	.379	.199	1.628
Religious attendance	.017	.103	.869	1.017	.002	.058	.971	1.002
Interest in politics	**2.820**	**.642**	**.000**	**16.779**	**2.236**	**.386**	**.000**	**9.353**
Sense of efficacy	.629	.563	.264	1.875	.449	.312	.150	1.567
Political trust (parties)	–.698	.549	.203	.497	.059	.377	.875	1.061
Ideology (right-left)	**1.800**	**.911**	**.048**	**6.047**	**.979**	**.486**	**.044**	**2.662**
Party identification (Forza Italia/PDL = ref.)								
AN	.783	.483	.105	2.188	—	—	—	—
Lega Nord	.553	.818	.499	1.739	.042	.331	.899	1.043
UDC	–2.446	**1.130**	**.030**	**.087**	.004	.494	.994	1.004
DS/PD	–.591	.621	.341	.554	–.133	.309	.668	.876
Margherita	–.926	.724	.201	.396	—	—	—	—
IDV	—	—	—	—	.617	.491	.209	1.853
Radical left parties	–.619	.749	.409	.539	.069	.462	.881	1.072
Other	–.329	.682	.630	.720	**1.387**	**.435**	**.001**	**4.004**
Participation in rallies	**.543**	**.277**	**.050**	**1.721**	.385	.207	.063	1.469
Reading political news	**2.419**	**.756**	**.001**	**11.235**	.374	.238	.115	1.454
Watching political news	.451	.603	.455	1.570	.256	.325	.431	1.291
Constant	**–9.640**	**1.460**	**.000**	**.000**	**–3.758**	**.661**	**.000**	**.023**
N	961				1103			
Nagelkerke R^2	.389				.360			

Note: Significant coefficients ($p \leq .05$) are reported in bold.

Table A.8. Results of Logistic Regression Model Predicting Internet Use for Political Information in Spain, 2008

	Coeff.	s.e.	Sig.	Exp(B)
Gender (male)	**.496**	**.134**	**.000**	**1.643**
Age	**–.045**	**.005**	**.000**	**.956**
Education	**.148**	**.027**	**.000**	**1.159**
Urban density	**.131**	**.037**	**.000**	**1.140**
Income	.044	.043	.305	1.045
Religious attendance	.017	.075	.824	1.017
Interest in election	**.625**	**.283**	**.027**	**1.868**
Sense of efficacy	**2.008**	**.476**	**.000**	**7.451**
Political trust (parties)	**–.857**	**.350**	**.014**	**.424**
Ideology (right-left)	.358	.432	.407	1.431
Party identification (PP = ref.)				
PSOE	**.521**	**.262**	**.047**	**1.683**
IU	.414	.340	.224	1.512
Others	.184	.302	.543	1.202
None	**.477**	**.236**	**.044**	**1.611**
Political discussion	**1.410**	**.319**	**.000**	**4.095**
Participation in rallies	.150	.225	.505	1.162
Working for parties/candidates	**.687**	**.327**	**.036**	**1.988**
Reading political news	**1.148**	**.187**	**.000**	**3.152**
Watching political news	.152	.245	.535	1.164
Constant	**–5.021**	**.496**	**.000**	**.007**
N	2926			
Nagelkerke R^2	.330			

Note: Significant coefficients ($p \leq .05$) are reported in bold.

Table A.9. Results of Logistic Regression Model Predicting Internet Use for Political Information in the United Kingdom, 2010

	Coeff.	s.e.	Sig.	Exp(B)
Gender (male)	**.342**	**.112**	**.002**	**1.408**
Race (white)	.087	.188	.643	1.091
Age	**–.052**	**.004**	**.000**	**.949**
Education	**.211**	**.040**	**.000**	**1.234**
Income	**.075**	**.014**	**.000**	**1.078**
Religious attendance	.063	.041	.120	1.065
Interest in politics	**1.092**	**.284**	**.000**	**2.980**
Sense of efficacy	.550	.335	.100	1.734
Political trust (parties)	**.753**	**.283**	**.008**	**2.123**

Continued

Table A.9. (*Continued*)

Party identification (Conservatives = ref.)				
Labour	–.056	.125	.653	.945
Liberal-Democrats	**.401**	**.153**	**.009**	**1.493**
Others	–.394	.258	.127	.674
Political discussion	**1.281**	**.213**	**.000**	**3.601**
Participation in rallies	**.612**	**.201**	**.002**	**1.845**
Working for parties/candidates	–.178	.273	.513	.837
Reading political news	.046	.111	.680	1.047
Watching political news	**.527**	**.227**	**.020**	**1.693**
Constant	**–2.170**	**.336**	**.000**	**.114**
N	2299			
Nagelkerke R^2	.395			

Note: Significant coefficients ($p \leq .05$) are reported in bold.

Table A.10. Results of Logistic Regression Model Predicting Internet Use for Political Information in the United States, 2008

	Coeff.	s.e.	Sig.	Exp(B)
Gender (male)	–.231	.127	.070	.794
Race (white)	.186	.158	.241	1.204
Age	**–.046**	**.004**	**.000**	**.955**
Education	**.289**	**.044**	**.000**	**1.335**
Urban density	.068	.070	.333	1.071
Income	**.044**	**.012**	**.000**	**1.045**
Religious attendance	.060	.036	.101	1.062
Interest in politics	**1.283**	**.274**	**.000**	**3.607**
Sense of efficacy	**.805**	**.388**	**.038**	**2.236**
Political trust (government)	–.200	.301	.506	.819
Ideology (right-left)	**.657**	**.314**	**.036**	**1.930**
Party identification (Republican = ref.)				
Democrat	–.096	.165	.558	.908
Independent	–.345	.224	.124	.708
Political discussion	**.484**	**.202**	**.016**	**1.623**
Participation in rallies	**.475**	**.243**	**.050**	**1.608**
Working for parties/candidates	.396	.358	.268	1.486
Reading political news	–.096	.178	.590	.909
Watching political news	.299	.212	.158	1.348
Constant	**–1.782**	**.460**	**.000**	**.168**
N	1339			
Nagelkerke R^2	.296			

Note: Significant coefficients ($p \leq .05$) are reported in bold.

Notes

CHAPTER 1: Introduction

1. Gerald Sussman (2005) has suggested that Americanization of contemporary Western politics may be understood as the result of imposition not by the United States but by transnational financial capital. From this perspective, the development of highly professionalized, capital-intensive, television-centered electioneering has allowed global economic elites to better control the public sphere through the financing of political speech in campaigns. As a result, neoliberal ideas have become dominant because politicians cannot run counter to the interests that feed their electoral coffers, thus relieving democracy from excessive popular demands. This argument, however, was developed with respect to broadcast rather than digital media, and it has not yet been reassessed in light of the changes brought about by the internet. It is, nonetheless, a thought-provoking perspective that should not be overlooked by scholars in the field.

2. Norris (2000: 149–159), for instance, suggests that the developments in campaigning that she describes depend on a set of mediating conditions: the regulatory environment, the party system, the media system, and the electorate. However, she does not go beyond stating these principles and does not apply these considerations to her empirical analysis of changes in electioneering methods.

3. The goal of relationship marketing is defined as ensuring that "organizational objectives are achieved by mutual exchange and fulfillment of promises" (Bowers-Brown 2003: 100) between citizens and political actors. This approach contrasts with the temporary convergence of interests that transaction-based marketing focuses on and that, as applied to politics, corresponds to trying to affect short-term voting behavior only.

CHAPTER 2: Understanding Digital Politics in Western Democracies

1. Data on internet diffusion were provided by the International Telecommunication Union, see http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/index.html.

2. The data come from the 2010 Australian Election Study (Australia), various issues of the Eurobarometer (France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom), and the 2006 World Values Survey (the United States). In the latter survey, the question asked was, "How democratically is this country being governed today?"

3. For instance, the German Pirate Party, which Schweitzer (2011) found to have a very robust online presence, and which has recently been quite successful in local elections, was not included in the analysis of the 2009 German elections.

4. The weights were calculated based on the algorithm: w_j = proportion in population in cell *j*/proportion in sample in cell *j*. First, country weights were calculated, then within-country weights were calculated, and finally country weights were multiplied by within-country weights to calculate the combined weight for each website. As an example, let us consider the case of the Australian Labor Party, which was analyzed three times. The total number of Australian websites that were analyzed was 46, so each Australian website had a .074 probability of being part of the total corpus. To equalize the weight of Australian websites to that of websites from other countries, I assumed that Australian websites were one-seventh of the websites in the population. Thus, the .14 (1 in 7) proportion in the population was divided by the .074 proportion in the sample, resulting in a 1.92 weight for all Australian websites. Country weight was then multiplied by an individual weight, which, for the Australian Labor Party, was calculated as follows. This website was analyzed three times out of 46 total observations of Australian websites, so its proportion in the sample was .06. Because 28 Australian parties and candidates were included in the analysis, the proportion of the ALP in the population was .03 (1 in 28). This proportion was then divided by the proportion in the sample (.06), resulting in a within-country weight of .54. Finally, I multiplied the country and within-country weights, so that the ALP had a combined weight of 1.92 * .54 = 1.05.

5. In discussing how to analyze comparative survey data, John Curtice (2007: 905–6) suggests that sample sizes may be either weighted to be proportionate to countries' populations or that each national sample can be considered "as a separate reading of the phenomenon," which would imply that the weighting algorithm should "equalize the sample sizes for each country." The latter is the choice that I have made here.

6. To ensure reliability in measurement, an instructed research assistant coded all the 31 websites included in the November and December 2007 US observations, which constitute 5% of the corpus. The results were compared with the author's coding, and Cohen's kappa indexes were calculated for all variables, apart from 28 variables which turned out to be constants. The average kappa index for the remaining variables was .951. A second instructed research assistant recoded all the 37 websites in the July and September 2007 observations, and the results were again compared with the author's. While 19 variables turned out to be constants, the average kappa index for the remaining variables was .956.

CHAPTER 3: Parties and the Internet

1. The opportunity costs of any type of digital communication entail the expected value of other endeavors that could be pursued with the same amount of resources required for that particular online activity.

2. European parties have long ago abandoned the "mass party" model and developed toward "electoral-professional" arrangements (Panebianco 1988), thus becoming more similar to their US counterparts. However, they have maintained an internal complexity and a legacy of organizational linkages that have led some scholars to propose an intermediate category, often termed "modern cadre party" (Koole 1994), between Panebianco's two ideal types. While modern cadre parties are less internally structured and membership oriented than mass parties, they retain an institutional

memory of those features that coexists with more recent developments toward professionalization, stronger leaderships, and a focus on electoral success.

CHAPTER 4: Citizens and the Internet

1. In defining political participation, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995: 39) exclude activities that involve "being attentive to politics," such as "following political events in the news or watching public affairs on television." However, other authors such as Milbrath and Goel (1965: 18) consider "exposing oneself to political stimuli" as the first stage in political involvement. More broadly, Ben Berger (2009: 341) has suggested an inclusive definition of "political engagement" as "attentive activity . . . that is intended to or has the consequences of affecting, either directly or indirectly, government action" and thus comprises, among other things, "following political issues (via any media format)." As a general theoretical outline, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady's framework can thus be useful for studying online information, understood as a first step toward participation. The analogy between information and participation is arguably more meaningful online, where opportunities for citizens to actively engage sit side by side with informational content, than offline, where there is greater physical and social separation between these two realms. This point is acknowledged by Schlozman, Verba, and Brady (2010: 501) themselves, as they write about digital media that "many forms of political engagement [on blogs and social networking sites] do not fall squarely under the rubric of a definition of political participation as 'activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action.' . . . However, these interactive forms of political engagement may lead to modes of online and offline political participation, as conventionally understood. Besides, these modes of involvement . . . are changing so rapidly that they may well morph into new forms of activity aimed at political influence." It thus seems legitimate to take these authors' theoretical conceptualizations and causal models of political participation as a template for understanding online information as a form of political engagement and a first step toward more direct participation.

CHAPTER 5: Structure and Features of Political Websites

1. The emails were written in each country's official language, were directed to the address provided on the official website for general inquiries, and had substantially identical wording. The issue email asked for the party or candidate's position on taxes, a policy on which each party must take a stand and that is discussed in any election in every country. The volunteer email simply stated that the sender was interested in helping the party or candidate and asked for instructions on how to do so. Responses to these emails were considered valid only if I evaluated them as being written by human beings, while automated responses were discounted.

Emails were sent from fictitious addresses, and imaginary sender names were used so that parties' and candidates' organizations would not be aware that their responsiveness was being monitored, which could have artificially altered the measured variables. From an ethical standpoint, concealing the research purpose of the email exchange can be justified because this activity did not violate any individual rights of the subjects. First, the focus was not on the individuals who responded to emails or

failed to do so, but on the organizations they worked for. Second, no personal information, let alone any sensitive data, was solicited through emails. Third, the contents of the responses were not even recorded beyond assessing whether the response had been written by a human being.

CHAPTER 6: Disparities in Political Websites

1. Assigning values to this variable was at times made complex by the fact that some parties merged or split between elections for strategic or tactical reasons. For instance, during the 2009 European Parliament elections, some parties that had run independently in the previous general election coalesced into unity lists to eschew vote thresholds in the electoral law that would have left them without representation. This is the case for the French Parti Radicale de Gauche, which had run independently in 2007, but had some of its candidates included in the lists of the Parti Socialiste in 2009. In order to estimate the vote share that the PS and PRG *might* have achieved had they run individually in 2009, I calculated that in 2007, when the two parties had run independently, they had obtained 24.73% (PS) and 1.32% (PRG) of the vote. Thus, they combined for 26.05%, of which 94.9% was obtained by PS (24.73/26.05) and 5.1% by PRG (1.32/26.05). I then estimated the 2009 vote shares for PS by multiplying the 2009 PS (with PRG candidates) vote (16.48%) by the previously calculated 2007 shares of the PS+PRG vote, thus obtaining 15.64% (16.48 * .949), and did the same to estimate PRG's 2009 vote share. The reverse was done when two parties had run in a unity list in one election and separately in another, as was the case for the Radical Party and the Democratic Party in Italy between the 2008 general elections and the 2009 European elections.

2. Because there is no single official repository of party and candidate financial data for all the countries that I examined, the quality and comprehensiveness of the data vary from country to country. In all countries but Spain, the available data include both public and private contributions and are published, respectively, by the Australian Electoral Commission (http://www.aec.gov.au), the French Commission Nationale des Comptes de Campagne et des Financements Politiques (http://www.cnccfp.fr), official reports by the German lower house of Parliament (http://dipbt.bundestag.de/dip21.web/bt), the Italian Official Gazette (http://www.guritel.it), the UK Electoral Commission (http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk), and the US Federal Electoral Commission (http://fec.gov). Unfortunately, the data for Spain include only public funding of parties, whose amounts are published in the Official State Bulletin (http://www.boe.es). The latest comprehensive data on both private and public party finance in Spain, which are certified and published by the Tribunal de Cuentas (http://www.tcu.es), were available only from 2007 backward at the time of this writing.

3. Data on internet diffusion were provided by the International Telecommunication Union; see http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/index.html.

4. $N = 21$. Only the correlation coefficient involving participation is statistically significant at $p \leq .05$.

5. This causal mechanism may also contribute to explaining why Italian parties compared more favorably to their counterparts in other countries with respect to information than as regards participation and delivery. A volatile party system, with new names, symbols, and cartels being created at a frantic pace to cajole skeptical vot-

ers (Cotta and Verzichelli 2007, chap. 2), forces political actors to explain themselves and narrate their developing stories more than it encourages them to engage voters, an endeavor that requires stability and long-term relationship building.

CHAPTER 7: Party Characteristics and Their Online Presence

1. While this finding contradicts anecdotal evidence and some portrayals of the 2010 e-campaign by a few UK media outlets, it is confirmed by other empirical studies. For instance, Gibson (2010: 14) analyzed online engagement hubs on party websites and found that "Labour emerges as the most active in promoting citizen-campaigning while the Conservatives are found to be considerably less so." Lilleker and Jackson (2010: 83, 93) studied online participation affordances on parties' online presence and found that Labour was the "best and most observably successful party" in terms of "connecting people together locally, and building communities of activists at the constituency level"; however, the authors also note that, while Conservatives increased their commitment over time to fostering participation through their online presence, Labour scaled it down compared to previous elections (which is consistent with the outparty innovation incentives theory).

2. Following Vassallo and Wilcox (2006: 418–419), I classified the US Democrats within the socialist group (which includes all European socialist and social-democratic parties as well as UK and Australian labor parties) and the Republicans within the conservative group (which includes all European Christian-democratic and people's parties as well as UK Conservatives and Australian Liberals). Classifying US parties based on ideology is problematic because they tend to be less cohesive and disciplined than their European counterparts and because they are often considered more centrist than European parties. To validate Vassallo and Wilcox's classification, I followed Mair and Mudde's (1998: 226) advice to integrate the genetic approach, which is at the root of ideological family classifications, with empirical assessments of parties' ideological profiles. The most reliable and updated measure of this dimension is parties' left-right orientations as assessed by country experts surveyed by Benoit and Laver (2006). On a left-right scale that ranges from 1 to 20, US Democrats averaged 7.1 and Republicans 16.6. In Australia, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom (data for French parties are not available on this dimension), socialist parties averaged 8.6 and conservatives averaged 15.6. Thus, American parties turn out to be more extreme rather than more centrist compared to European and Australian parties, and they are also close to the average left-right positions among such parties. No other party included in the expert survey in all the countries covered by this study scored closer to US Democrats than the socialist, social-democratic, and labor parties; similarly, none scored closer to US Republicans than Christian-democratic and conservative parties. Indeed, the distance between US parties and the averages of the other parties included in the same groups is less than 1 standard deviation (standard deviations are 1.7 among socialists and 1.2 among conservatives). This is because, even among supposedly more homogeneous European party families, there are parties that are both more extreme (such as the Spanish Popular Party and the Italian Democrats of the Left) and more centrist (like the German Christian Democratic Union and the UK Labour Party) than US Republicans and Democrats were found to be. Contemporary comparative research on political parties has often classified US parties in the same groups as I have (see, e.g., McDonald,

Mendes, and Kim 2007; Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister 2011). Thus, the classification I employed is validated by empirical data on parties' left-right positions as evaluated by country experts as well as recent scholarly orientations.

3. For leader selection methods, Janda (1980) proposes eight categories, ranging in terms of inclusiveness from selection by vote of party identifiers or supporters to selection by the leader's predecessor. For candidate selection methods, the categories are nine, from vote of local party supporters in an open primary to selection by a national committee or party council. In order to classify all parties (and candidates and leaders based on the practices adopted by their parties), I collected parties' official statutes and regulations when they were published on their websites; when these documents were not publicly available, I relied on news sources and email exchanges with party officials, whenever possible. For US parties, I followed Kenig (2009) and considered their presidential candidate selection methods as their leader selection methods. Maria Laura Sudulich kindly shared with me the data for some British, Italian, and Spanish parties; Ofer Kenig provided some useful information on leader selection methods (see also Kenig 2009); Susan Scarrow also offered valuable advice on German parties; finally, the book by Rahat and Hazan (2010) was a source of relevant information.

CHAPTER 8: What Drives the Online Presence of Parties and Candidates?

1. Technological development is measured as the average of the following indicators: number of internet users per 100 inhabitants, number of broadband users per 100 inhabitants, and percentage of households with an internet connection. The first two measures come from the International Telecommunication Union (http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/), while the third comes from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (http://www.oecd.org/sti/ICTindicators). The index varies between 0 and 100. Cronbach's α measuring internal consistency of these three indicators equals .882.

2. Political trust is measured as the average of the following indicators: percentage of citizens who express trust in political parties; percentage of citizens who express trust in their national government; percentage of citizens who claim to be satisfied with the way democracy works in their country. The data come from the 2007 and 2010 Australian Election Studies (Australia), various issues of the Eurobarometer (France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom), and World Values Survey (the United States). The index varies between 0 and 100. Cronbach's α measuring internal consistency of these three indicators equals .763.

3. As is well known, voting is the most common form of political participation in Western democracies (Dalton 1988). Voter turnout data were obtained from official websites of government institutions in each country. For US primaries and general elections, turnout was calculated with the data available on http://elections.gmu.edu, which are based on state-by-state estimates of the voting eligible population that are more accurate than figures based on the voting-age population.

4. Elections for the European Parliament are conducted with a proportional system in all member countries, which implies that France and the United Kingdom switch from majoritarian to proportional systems between general and European elections. Moreover, in the 2008 US presidential primaries the electoral systems used to allocate

delegates at the conventions that effectively nominate candidates were markedly different for Democratic and Republican contests, with the former resembling a proportional and the latter a majoritarian rule (Sharkansky 2010).

5. These country dummy variables also allow clustering cases from the same country, thus controlling for the possibility that the effects of some independent variables may differ in different countries and that some correlations may exist between the online presence of parties and candidates in the same country. An alternative way to address this issue would have been to use a multilevel regression model, but unfortunately the number of units in my dataset is too small to warrant robust analyses based on this statistical technique. It must also be acknowledged that the country dummy variables introduce a certain degree of multicollinearity in the regression, as they are correlated to some extent with the other macro-level variables included in the models. However, the coefficients for most variables do not change significantly when the country dummy variables are excluded, which also eliminates all multicollinearity issues. Therefore, I preferred to keep the country dummy variables in the model while acknowledging multicollinearity, mainly for two reasons. First, this is the best practical way to recognize that political actors in the same country may affect each other's behavior. Second, including country dummies allows appreciation of the fact that, as we will see below, some important institutional and structural characteristics that are not included in this model may affect parties' and candidates' online presence in a relevant way.

6. For US candidate websites, during the primary campaign the variable takes as a reference point the vote in the early states in January 2008. Once the competitive stage of the primaries ended (March 2008 for Republicans, June 2008 for Democrats), the reference point was set to November 2008, when the general election was held.

7. See chapter 6 for information on the sources and limitations of the data.

8. See chapter 7 for information on the operational definition and coding of this variable.

9. See chapter 7 for information on the operational definition of this variable.

10. Combining observations taken during election campaigns and others collected during "peacetime" periods between campaigns may raise issues of causal heterogeneity, as the processes and mechanisms that affect parties' and candidates' online communication may differ. In order to test this hypothesis, I excluded all the observations taken outside campaigns (i.e., when more than three months were left before the next election or, in the case of US primary candidates, the Iowa caucuses) and ran the same regression models with the remaining data. Because the signs, magnitude, and significance of most coefficients did not change substantially compared to the models presented in table 8.1, it is safe to assume that the causal processes that guide political actors' online communication choices during and between campaigns are homogeneous. Thus, the results of the models that include all observations should be considered valid. Because the models include control variables for the months left before the next general elections and for aggregate voter turnout (which allows differentiation between first- and second-order elections [see Van der Eijk and Franklin 1996], as well as between primary and general elections), the effects of different campaign contexts are adequately accounted for in the analysis.

11. Adjusted R^2 coefficients for such models are, respectively, .091 for information, .163 for participation, and .081 for delivery.

12. The values of the macro-level variables for each country reveal important differences between the countries included in this study. The variable measuring technological development, for instance, ranges from a minimum of 30.79 (Italy in 2006) to a maximum of 65.33 (the United Kingdom in 2010), with a standard deviation of 9.75. The variable measuring political trust ranges from a minimum of 23.33 (Italy in 2008) to a maximum of 57.33 (Spain in 2008), with a standard deviation of 8.37.

13. Two of which by the less-demanding standard of $p \leq .1$ (marked with a # sign in table 8.1).

14. I chose to run separate analyses of the issue question and volunteer pledge emails because, first, they were included in different additive website indices (information and participation, respectively) and, second, because even if they are somewhat related, the empirical correlation between them is not particularly strong (the φ coefficient measuring association between the two dichotomous variables is .399, $p = .000$).

15. Nagelkerke R^2 coefficients for models that include only structural independent variables are .183 for models predicting response to the issue question and .105 for those predicting response to the volunteer pledge.

16. As we will see in chapter 9, Australian citizens were also among the most active in digital politics, but political actors in this country may be more likely to answer emails (as shown by the prevalence of negative country coefficients among other countries while Australia serves as the reference category) because compulsory voting prompts Australian parties to focus their online efforts on voter persuasion, for which emails may constitute a useful tool. Indirect proof of this is that the values of the coefficients comparing Australia with other countries are generally higher (indicating a larger gap) when predicting answers to issue questions than to volunteer pledges.

CHAPTER 9: Online Political Information in Seven Countries

1. A partial exception is France, where, as shown in the appendix, the best available question did not directly ask whether respondents used the internet for electoral information but instead requested them to name the two most important sources of campaign news among television, radio, internet, national newspapers, regional newspapers, free newspapers, and other sources. I thus treat all those French respondents that named the internet as either their first or second source of campaign information as equivalent to those citizens in the other six countries that reported using the internet at least occasionally for campaign information. However, it must be acknowledged that the two measurements do not entirely overlap because, whereas the French question is based on a comparative rank ordering of the importance of various media channels, the questions asked in other countries deal with frequency of use, or lack thereof, of the internet. Thus, comparisons involving France must be treated with caution.

2. Again, with the exception of France, as explained in the previous note.

CHAPTER 10: Socioeconomic Inequalities and Online Political Information

1. The finding that the multivariate correlation for Italy is positive but not significant is also surprising, considering that gender inequalities are extensive in this coun-

try. Since, however, income is not controlled for in the Italian model, this finding must be interpreted with caution.

2. In the United States, citizens of Asian origin have a particular sociodemographic and political profile compared to other minorities (Lien et al. 2001). In the American National Election Study 2008 dataset, there are only 47 respondents who identified themselves as Asian, so the findings related to this subgroup must be treated with caution. That being said, among them, an even higher percentage than whites (62.2%) claimed to have used the internet for campaign information, so that, if we excluded Asians from the nonwhite population, the gap between whites and nonwhites would be higher. Adding a variable measuring Asian ethnicity to the multivariate models, however, returns positive but statistically not significant coefficients for both the white and the Asian ethnicities compared to other nonwhites.

3. According to the OECD, in 2009 the percentages of citizens with less than an upper secondary education was 48% in Spain, 46% in Italy, 30% in France, 29% in Australia, 14% in Germany, and 11% in both the United Kingdom and the United States (OECD 2011a).

4. Respondents' professional status was nevertheless included as a control variable in the multivariate model for Italy, as can be seen in the appendix.

5. In a detailed analysis of various different types of online political participation based on a 2008 postelection survey, Nam and Stromer-Galley (2012) also find that digital political divides based on income and education persist in the United States. Interestingly, the only type of online political engagement where inequalities rooted in socioeconomic status were found to have no impact is political use of social networking sites, which, the authors argue, "contribute to participatory equalization by boosting participation of the less educated and less affluent" (Nam and Stromer-Galley 2012: 144).

6. Incidentally, this is why Lijphart (1997) has suggested compulsory voting as a possible solution for the socioeconomic status-based inequalities in voter turnout in the United States.

CHAPTER 11: Political Attitudes and Online Information

1. The question regarding interest in politics had different numbers of response categories in each country: five in Germany and the United Kingdom, five (for half of the sample) and four (for the other half of the sample) in the United States, and four in Australia, France, Italy, and Spain (here the question referred to interest in the election campaign rather than politics in general). In order to make the results comparable across countries despite these differences, the values of the political interest variables have been normalized. As a result, in each country, those who answered the question by placing themselves into the category expressing the most interest are coded as 1, those that located themselves in the category expressing the least interest are coded as 0, and all the intermediate response categories have values between 0 and 1.

2. The question wording for the variable measuring use of the internet for campaign information was different in France compared to all the other countries, because French respondents were asked to mention the two main sources of information that they relied on during the campaign. Consistently, to compare political interest among users of the internet, newspapers, and television, I derived measures of media

preferences from the same survey question from which I computed the variable measuring internet use for political information (see chapter 9). As already explained, these variables should be interpreted as measuring relative media preferences rather than absolute usage behaviors.

3. Among the whole Australian samples, average values of interest in politics were .73 in 2007 and .70 in 2010. Among all Italian respondents, the values were .35 and .41 in 2006 and 2008, respectively.

4. It should be noted that, owing to the different questionnaire structures, the variables include compound measures of both internal and external political efficacy in Germany, Spain, and the United States, while they are based solely on measures of internal political efficacy in Italy and the United Kingdom, and of external political efficacy alone in Australia and France.

5. In all countries but Australia and the United States, I used trust in political parties as an indicator of political trust; in Australia and the United States, where this question was not asked, I used trust in government as the best available alternative indicator. In Germany, no measure was available of trust in either parties or government.

6. In all three cases, the difference between the percentage of supporters of the challenger and the incumbent parties who went online for political information was statistically significant at $p = .000$ based on two-tailed t-tests.

7. $p = .000$, .005, and .025 (two-tailed t-test), respectively.

8. The American National Election Survey did not measure identification with any minor party. Independents, however, were found to be significantly less likely than both Democrats and Republicans to rely on the internet for campaign information (see table 11.3).

9. The only other comparable case is Italy, where in 2008 the UDC tried to establish a new centrist pole to shatter the competition between the two main coalitions, but the interest for online politics among its supporters was scant. However, the chances of success of the UDC project were arguably much lower than those of the other parties discussed here.

10. In the run-up to the 2009 general elections in Germany, the Linke achieved the highest information and delivery indices and the third highest participation index amongst all its competitors. In Italy, the left-wing cartel Left, Ecology, and Freedom and its leader Nichi Vendola have invested heavily in their digital efforts. While Izquierda Unida's online efforts were dwarfed by those of major parties in the 2008 Spanish general elections, during the 2009 European election campaign the neocommunist party offered the website with the most information functions, and its participation and delivery indices were on par with those of the major parties.

11. In the French 2007 presidential elections, Front national's leader Jean-Marie Le Pen's website was among the least engaging, with a participation index equaling only 6, and the party's website featured fewer functions than both the major parties' and some minor parties' (such as the Greens') websites as well. In the 2010 UK elections, the British National Party's website hosted a relatively high number of features (although not as high as the three main parties'), but the United Kingdom's Independence Party's online presence was much less ambitious.

12. As limited as counterfactual arguments are, one could imagine that, if a popular outsider such as New York mayor Michael Bloomberg—who had changed his party

affiliation from Democratic to Republican before declaring himself an Independent in 2007—had run for president in 2008 (as he was often reported to be considering), his online efforts and support might have rivaled that of major party candidates, just as Perot successfully relied on then-unconventional media outlets in his 1992 presidential bid (Rosenstiel 1994).

13. As I already emphasized in chapter 7, the focus of Karpf's (2012) theory of outparty innovation incentives is broader—in terms of political actors involved, organizational dynamics, and temporal dynamics—than can be fully tested within the limits of this research. The implications of my findings thus suggest that the theory should be better specified in comparative perspective rather than refuted.

14. It could be argued that Spain is also an example of a democracy that functions under the majoritarian "vision" because its proportional electoral system mostly benefits the two main parties and has thus nurtured a two-party system at the national level. Many regional parties, however, manage to gain parliamentary seats that have often been decisive in forming a majority in support of the one-party governments led by either the socialist or the popular parties.

CHAPTER 12: Political Engagement, Mass Media Use, and Online Information

1. Two relevant dimensions of political participation, however, are not included among these variables: voting, which is the most common act of political participation; and protest activities, which are typical of social movements and have achieved increasing relevance in contemporary societies (Meyer and Tarrow 1998). Voting was excluded because, as is well known, self-assessments of electoral participation among survey respondents tend to be highly unreliable since it is socially undesirable to admit deserting the ballot box (Bernstein, Chadha, and Montjoy 2001). This distortion is particularly strong in countries that usually exhibit high levels of participation (Karp and Brockington 2005), as is the case for all countries included in this study except for the United States and United Kingdom. Even American voters, however, grossly overstate their voting participation: in the 2008 American National Election Studies, for instance, 78% of respondents reported having voted in the last election, as opposed to a 62% real turnout rate. Thus, including self-reported measures of turnout would have strongly compromised the validity of the results. As for participation activities related to protest and often conducted within social movement organizations, I chose not to include them because, first, they were not measured consistently across the seven countries in this study and, second, this book focuses broadly on the institutional dimensions of digital politics.

2. The peculiarity of the French bivariate finding (i.e., voters who reported watching political news on television were less likely to get political information through the internet than those who did not watch televised political information) is not easily explained because, unfortunately, the French questionnaire probed television watching but not newspaper reading. That being said, the French result could be interpreted as a confirmation of the findings related to political efficacy and trust. Whereas among French voters the internet is mostly seen as an alternative channel that caters to the politically disaffected, television may be more popular among those who express systemic

support. However, in France, as in all other countries, the multivariate correlation between television and internet news turns out to be positive rather than negative, although it is not statistically significant.

3. Respondents to the British Election Study were asked to name the daily newspaper they read most often. I classified the following newspapers as tabloids: *Daily Mail/Scottish Daily Mail*, *Daily Star/Daily Star of Scotland*, *Daily Express, Independent*, *Mirror/Scottish Mirror/Daily Record*, *Scotsman*, *Sun*, *Western Mail*, *Metro*, and *Evening Standard*. The following newspapers were instead classified as broadsheets: *Daily Telegraph*, *Financial Times*, *Guardian*, and the *Times*. Respondents who answered "Your city's local newspaper" and "Other" were classified in a residual category, among whom 25.6% went online for political information.

4. A similar hypothesis could apply to the United States, where the correlation between political information in newspapers and on the internet is weak by comparison with other countries. Most Americans read local rather than national newspapers, and the former tend to focus much more on crime, lifestyle, and local issues, and less on politics, than the latter (Kaniss 1991). Unfortunately, this hypothesis cannot be tested here because no measure of the types of newspapers that respondents read is available in the American National Election Studies.

5. The United States spends only 2.6 euros per person to subsidize public broadcasting, resulting in minimal audience shares. The Australian public service television is entirely funded by the government, but the per capita per annum funding is similar to that of Italy and its audience share is below 20%.

CHAPTER 13: Correlates of Online Political Information in Seven Democracies

1. Comparing the results of regression models that were run independently, one country at a time, requires establishing replicable procedures for the meta-analysis of findings. According to Mark Lipsey and David Wilson (2001: 5, 15–16), "The dichotomous categorization of study findings into those that are statistically significant and those that are not is a rudimentary form of effect size," a key component of meta-analysis, but "the more desirable forms index both the *magnitude* and the *direction* of a relationship, not merely its statistical significance." However, the same authors also claim that, due to statistical limitations, "multiple regression results cannot generally be represented in an effect size statistic" and instead "selected bivariate correlations" could be used as estimates of effect size. This procedure, however, would by definition forgo the opportunity to control for other variables and to assess the independent causal contribution of each variable. Given these limitations, I have chosen to employ the only (admittedly rudimentary) form of meta-analysis that allows comparison of multivariate rather than bivariate correlations: the categorization of correlations as positive or negative as well as statistically significant or not. On the basis of similar considerations, Shelley Boulianne (2009: 197) used three measures in her meta-analysis of the effects of internet use on political engagement: whether effects were positive or negative, their statistical significance or lack thereof, and an average of the standardized coefficients across all the studies she analyzed. I chose to forgo the latter criterion, while adopting the former two, because, as Boulianne herself admits, it is an imperfect

measure of effect size. Moreover, averages of standardized coefficients would have suffered from biases caused by differences in the individual countries' survey measurements, which were impossible to eliminate.

CHAPTER 14: Conclusion

1. Although the 2012 US presidential elections have not been covered in this study, news reports and anecdotal evidence suggest that the online presence of Barack Obama may still have been more sophisticated than that of Republican contender Mitt Romney, thus casting doubt on the theory in the United States as well.

APPENDIX

1. I decided to include the latest national election in each country because research has shown, first, that political actors tend to increase the functions on their websites as time progresses, and second, that activity on party and candidate websites increases during national elections. The analysis was thus conducted on observations that should measure websites at the peak of their activity.

2. This final criterion implied that all the many studies that employed slightly adjusted versions of the coding frame suggested by Gibson and Ward (2000) were excluded from the population of studies on which the meta-analysis was conducted. The very important Internet and Elections Project (Kluver et al. 2007) was also not included on the grounds that it focused on a broader range of political actors than parties and candidates and that it relied on the same general categories as the coding frame employed by Foot and Schneider (2006), who are indeed two of the four editors of the book where the results of the project are reported. The coding frame employed by Jackson and Lilleker (2009) was not included because it was designed to specifically address a single dimension—interactivity—rather than political actors' whole online presence.

3. The data and full methodological information are available at http://electionstudies.org/studypages/2008prepost/2008prepost.htm.

4. The data and full methodological information are available to scholars and institutions belonging to the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) at http://www.assda.edu.au/data.html.

5. The data and full methodological information are available at http://bes2009-10.org.

6. The data and full methodological information are available upon request at http://cdsp.sciences-po.fr/.

7. The data and full methodological information are available at http://www.gesis.org/wahlen/gles/.

8. The data and full methodological information are available upon request at http://www.itanes.org/dati/.

9. The data and full methodological information are available at http://www.cis.es/cis/opencms/ES/1_encuestas/catalogoencuestas.html. The study is cataloged as number 2757.

10. The data and full methodological information are available at http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb71/eb71_en.htm).

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Index

Abbott, Tony, 100
Alleanza Nazionale (Italy), 101
Allen, George, 2
Americanization: definitions of, 5; as diffusion, 7–11, 17; digital politics and, ix, 1–12, 39, 207–210; as imitation, 3, 6–7, 25, 120; as imposition, 6, 243n1 (chap. 1); mass media politics and, 5, 243n1 (chap. 1); as modernization, 7–11, 14, 17. *See also* United States
American National Election Studies, 44, 173, 235, 236, 252n8, 253n1, 255n3
attitude change. *See* persuasion
Australia: electoral system of, 92 (s*ee also* compulsory voting); federal elections of 2007, 132; federal elections of 2007, online political information in, 157, 165–66, 171, 201–202, 210, 216; federal elections of 2007, political websites in, 100, 209, 216; federal elections of 2010, 33, 89, 132; federal elections of 2010, online political information in, 157, 165–166, 190, 202, 216; federal elections of 2010, political websites in, 100, 209, 216; income inequalities in, 150, 195–196
Australian Election Study, 44, 235, 236, 243n2 (chap. 2), 248n2, 255n4
Australian Labor Party, 3, 11, 247n2; online political information among voters of, 165–166; website of, 83–84, 89, 100, 102, 105–106, 244n4

Barr, Bob, 173
Bayrou, François, 169, 202
Bennett, W. Lance, 8, 15, 161, 189
Berlusconi, Silvio, 3, 103, 166–167, 171
Bimber, Bruce, 12, 16, 34, 51, 60, 156, 182, 188, 192, 214, 218, 220
blogs, 12, 98; adoption by political actors of, x, 2, 48, 52, 99; campaigns and, 70; political websites and, 39, 40, 42, 44, 46, 88; video-, 101
Bloomberg, Michael, 253n12
Blue State Digital, 3, 53, 89
British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), 187–188, 200
British Election Study, 44, 235, 236, 254n3, 255n5
British National Party (United Kingdom), 169, 253n11
Bush, George W., 99

Cameron, David, 38, 101
campaign communication: candidate-centered, 8, 55, 96, 103, 120; consultants in, 5–6, 10, 94; development of, 8–10; digital consultants in, 3, 12, 53, 115, 127, 217; hybridization of, 10–11; layered approach to, 11–12, 17, 84, 93; parties and, 8–9; public financing of, 76, 172
case selection, 28–33; diverse strategy for, 18, 30; most different systems design, 30; most similar systems design, 30; temporal and spatial limitations of, x–xi, 29, 103, 163; validity, 29. *See also* comparative research
Centro de Investigaciones Sociologicas, 44, 236, 238, 256n9
Chadwick, Andrew, 3, 7, 13, 14, 15, 16, 34, 51, 62, 73, 87, 96, 120, 127, 151, 157, 182, 184, 214, 218
Chasse, Pêche, Nature et Traditions (France), 89

Christian-Democratic Union (Germany), 32, 102, 105, 127, 165, 168, 247n2
citizenship: critical, 118, 123, 159–161, 188, 199; normative definitions of, 15, 219; transformations of, 218, 220
Clinton, Hillary Rodham, 83, 88
comparative research: design, 28–34; hypothesis testing and, 29, 50–51; need for, in digital politics, vii–viii, 13–14, 30, 210, 213, 223
compulsory voting: electoral mobilization and, 33, 96, 117, 120, 250n16; voter turnout and, 150, 152, 195, 212
Conservative Party (United Kingdom), 3, 31–32, 38, 168, 202, 247n2; online political information among voters of, 165; website of, 100–102, 105, 247n1
Covergencia y Uniò (Spain), 89

DailyKos, 99
database technologies, x, 6, 9, 16, 35, 222; computational management through, 16, 75; privacy regulation of, 75–76
Davis, Richard, 12, 34, 48, 51, 60, 156, 182, 218
Dean, Howard, 1, 2, 3, 4, 12, 50, 99
demand of digital politics: definition of, viii, xi, 4, 5, 34, 128; email responsiveness and, 121–123; relationship with supply, 51–52, 137, 169, 174, 203, 205, 215–217; research on, 14, 223; size in sampled countries, 27, 95, 171, 193, 197, 219. *See also* online political information
democracy, 29, 30; adaptability of, xi; "audience," 8; competitive, 27; direct, 162; digital, x; duration of, 29, 97; equality and liberty in, 87; implantation by Western powers of, 6; internet and (*see* internet: contribution to democracy); quality of, 132, 158; representative, 16; requirements for, 131, 219; satisfaction with, 32, 112, 118; "third wave," 29; United States as model of, vii; "visions" of, 20–21, 55, 103, 174, 211–212, 253n14
Democratic National Committee (United States). *See* Democratic Party (United States)
Democratic Party (Italy), 38, 55, 101–102, 105, 165–166, 246n1
Democratic Party (United States), 1, 2, 18, 247n2; online political information among voters of, 165–166, 171–173; use of the web by candidates of, 54, 77, 209, 221; website of, 77, 80, 99, 102, 105–106
Democrats of the Left (Italy), 83, 101–102, 105, 165–166, 247n2
determinism: social, 7; technological, 7, 14
digital divide, 19, 26; American origin of, 63; causal drivers of, 61, 151, 196; dimensions of, 58–59; gender and, 139–141; online political information and, 134–136; political implications of, 148, 151, 193, 209, 215; political websites and, 95–97; skills and, 26, 59, 65, 193–194, 209; variation across sampled countries, 29–30, 31. *See also* technological development
digital media. *See* internet
Dupont-Aignan, Nicolas, 83

Edwards, John, 83
electoral systems: email responsiveness and, 123; normalization and, 54, 90–95, 203–204, 208–211; online political information and, 19–20, 169, 174, 203–204, 208–212, 215; party systems and, 20, 31, 54, 92–93, 172, 211; political websites and, 19, 26, 90–95, 112, 119, 208–212, 215; variation across sampled countries, 31–32; voter turnout and, 150, 212. *See also* democracy; incentives: electoral systems as
email, 48; distribution to subscribers, 41–42, 62, 70, 74, 79–82, 85, 88; feedback via, 81; fundraising via, 81, 85; mobilization via, 62, 123; responsiveness to, 40, 42–43, 72–74, 77–78, 85, 120–124, 208
endogeneity, 58
Eurobarometer, 135–6, 236, 239, 243n2 (chap. 2), 248n2, 256n10
European Commission, 1
European Parliament: elections as second-order, 117; elections of 2004, 60; elections of 2009, 37, 38, 89, 50, 135, 246n1, 252n10; electoral systems of, 172, 248n4
Europe Ecologie (France), 83, 89

Facebook, 3, 7, 34, 41, 74
Family First (Australia), 89
field operations, 8–10, 64, 75, 221–222. *See also* mobilization; volunteers
Five Star Movement (Italy), x–xi, 18, 162. *See also* Grillo, Beppe
Foot, Kirsten A., 12, 33, 34, 39, 49, 54, 78, 83, 229–234, 255n2
Forza Italia (Italy), 101–102, 105, 165–166
France: electoral system of, 92, 174; mainstream political culture of, 160; party organizations in, 120; presidential elections of 2007, 33; presidential elections of 2007, online political information in, 132, 165–166, 202, 216; presidential elections of 2007, political websites in, 2, 37, 101, 216, 252n11; presidential elections of 2012, 75; referendum of 2005 on European Constitution, 160–161
Free Democratic Party (Germany), 168
Freedom House, 30
French Election Study, 44, 235, 236, 255n6
Front National (France), 169, 252n11
fundraising: campaigns and, 54, 94, 96; digital media and, viii, 3, 43–45, 74–77, 93–95, 99, 201, 221; using email, 81, 85

German Longitudinal Election Study, 44, 235, 238, 255n7
Germany: Constitutional Court of, 188; electoral system of, 93; general elections of 2009, 33, 132, 165, 203, 216, 243n1 (chap. 2), 252n10; grand coalitions in, 33, 101, 127, 165; public service broadcaster of, 187–188, 200; *Volkspartei* in, 64, 120
Gibson, Rachel, 13, 15, 39, 41, 48, 49, 51, 53, 55, 79, 83, 90, 182, 229–234, 247n1, 255n2
Gillard, Julia, 100
Google, 7
government: minority, 32; parliamentary, 31, 54; parties' alternation in, 32, 33, 164, 172, 174; parties' influence on, 20, 54–55, 92–93, 174, 202–204, 208, 210–211; presidential, 31; presidentialization of, 36; semipresidential, 31; trust in, 20, 46, 161–162, 252n5
Gravel, Mike, 88
Green Party (Australia), 171, 172
Green Party (France), 252n11. *See also* Europe Ecologie (France)
Green Party (Germany), 174
Grillo, Beppe, x, 162. *See also* Five Star Movement (Italy)

Hollande, François, 3, 75
Howard, John, 100, 102, 171
Howard, Philip N., 9, 13, 15, 16, 62, 76, 85, 184, 218
hybridization: of campaign communication, 10–11; of political organizations, 14, 16. *See also* news media: hybridization with digital media

incentives: competitive, 14, 99, 103, 166–167; contextual, 12, 13, 28, 80, 97, 210–213; electoral systems as, 26, 54, 90–95, 119, 126, 204, 208–211; institutional, 13, 19, 32, 51, 54, 97, 120; organizational, ix, 49–50, 52, 55–56, 125; "outparty innovation" (*see* incumbency); process, 214; regulatory, ix, 76–77, 96; social, 196; technological, 27, 51, 56, 95
incumbency: innovations and, 52–53, 55–56; online political information and, 20, 61, 163–166, 171, 174, 201–204, 209–212; political websites and, 26, 28, 98–104, 119, 124, 127
Independence Party (United Kingdom), 83, 253n11
Indignados movement (Spain), 161
innovations: causal drivers of, 7, 28, 211; diffusion of, 53, 215, 221; digital media and, vii, x–xi, 11, 50, 73, 128, 193–194; "disruptive" and "sustaining," 49; propensity toward, 52–53, 55–56, 99, 126–128, 203–204; resistance to, 49–50
International Telecommunication Union (ITU), 133, 136, 243n1 (chap. 2), 246n3, 248n1
internet: access to (*see* digital divide); affordances of, ix, 4, 11, 15, 34, 35, 214–215; broadband, vii, 26, 31, 51, 72, 196; complexity of, 11, 193; contribution to democracy of, 15–16, 71, 132, 141, 148, 217–220; diffusion in campaigns, vii, 4; integration with

internet (*continued*)
everyday life, 4, 17, 116, 151, 157, 189; integration with offline realities, 180, 183–186, 200, 217–223; mass self-communication and, 14–15; user control of (*see* selectivity)
Israel, general elections of 2009, 3
Italian National Election Studies, 44, 235–236, 238, 255n8
Italy: electoral system of, 92–93; general elections of 2006, 38; general elections of 2006, online political information in, 132, 157, 165–166, 171, 201, 216; general elections of 2006, political websites in, 101, 209, 216; general elections of 2008, 33, 38, 246n1, 252n9; general elections of 2008, online political information in, 132, 157, 165–166, 171, 190, 202–203, 216; general elections of 2008, political websites in, 101, 209, 216; general elections of 2013, x–xi; income inequalities in, 149; party organizations in, 120; party system volatility in, 164, 246n5; referendum of 2011, 162; television in, 103, 120, 166–167
Izquierda Unida (Spain), 89, 169, 252n10

Janda, Kenneth, 109, 248n3 (chap. 7)

Karpf, David, xv, 2, 11, 49, 55, 62, 98, 103, 104, 127, 128, 166, 167, 171, 214, 253n13
Kerry, John, 221

Labour Party (United Kingdom), 3, 31–32, 168, 202, 247n2; online political information among voters of, 165; website of, 100–102, 105, 247n1
La Margherita (Italy), 101
Left, Ecology and Freedom (Italy), 252n10
Le Pen, Jean-Marie, 252n11
Liberal-Democrats (United Kingdom), 32, 168–171, 174, 202, 204–205, 208, 210
Liberal Party (Australia), 31, 89, 100, 102, 105, 165–166, 247n2
Libertarian Party (United States), 93, 173
Libertas (France), 89
Linke, Die (Germany), 169, 171, 252n10

Margolis, Michael, 13, 16, 27, 52, 54, 59, 60, 125, 173
mass media. *See* news media
McCain, John S., 37, 99, 102, 105
Merkel, Angela, 105
meta-analysis: of multivariate regression models, 47, 190–191, 254n1; of studies of party websites, 54, 90; of studies of the internet and political engagement, 13, 57, 255n1 (chap. 13); of website coding frames, 40–43, 228–234, 255n2
Meetup.com, 1, 74
mobile phones, 40, 70, 222
mobilization: American parties and, 64; compulsory voting and, 33, 96–97, 117; digital media and, 3, 45, 161, 189, 199, 212; direct and indirect, 218–219; election campaigns and, 8, 9; political parties and, 108, 201. *See also* field operations; reinforcement
Mouvement pour la France (France), 89
MoveOn.org, 98–99

Nader, Ralph, 173
National Party of Australia, 31, 84, 89
Netanyahu, Benjamin, 3
news media: adoption of digital media by, 183; attention to, 155; autonomy from politics, 32; coverage of minorities by, 143; coverage of minor parties by, 54, 169, 172–173; coverage of politics by, 49, 213; coverage of radical parties by, 53, 163; effects of, 8–9, 131, 187, 188, 213, 222, 234n2; exposure to, 45–46; gatekeeper role of, 169; hybridization with digital media, 73, 157–158, 183–186, 200, 218, 220; interpersonal discussion and, 182; online tools to contact, 74, 77, 88; party parallelism in, 202–203; substitution with digital media, 183–185, 200; systems, 12, 32, 184, 186–188, 200–201, 213, 223; trust in, 8; use for political information, 46, 131, 155–156, 183–189, 198, 200–201, 218; variation across sampled countries, 32. *See also* newspapers; television
newspapers: quality vs. tabloid, 186–187, 201; use for political information, 46, 60, 155–156, 183–189, 200–201, 218

Nielsen, Rasmus Kleis, xv, 6, 10, 11, 50, 64, 76, 187
normalization: American origin of, 54, 126, 173, 207–208; of citizen engagement, 27, 59, 180, 196, 203, 208–210 (*see also* reinforcement); definition, 16–18; mediated by electoral systems, 90–93, 126; of party communication, 49–50; of party competition, 52, 90, 125–126, 173, 208, 211
Norris, Pippa, 8, 9, 34, 39, 51, 59, 60, 126, 131, 139, 150, 159, 178, 182, 204, 219, 229–234, 243n2 (chap. 1)

Obama, Barack H.: campaign of 2008, x, 35, 134, 142, 145, 166, 221; campaign of 2012, x, 255n1 (chap. 14); comparisons with, 50; emulation of, 3, 4, 12, 75, 99; website of, 37, 38, 83, 99, 102, 105
online political information, 19, 27, 44; age and, 46, 143–146, 151, 193–194, 197, 209; competition and, 201–205, 216; education and, 20, 146–148, 150–151, 193–194, 197, 209, 215; engagement and, 198–201, 216; gender and, 20, 46, 139–141, 150–151, 194–195, 197, 209; ideology and, 26, 163–175, 204–205, 216; income and, 20, 46, 148–151, 194–197, 209, 215; inequalities in, 20, 26–27, 58–63, 138–152, 193–198, 209, 215, 251n5; interest in politics and, 154–158, 216; methods to study, 44–47; news media use and, 183–189, 200–201; party identification and, 163–175, 204–205, 216; political discussion and, 4, 46, 177–183, 189, 198–200, 201, 218–219; political efficacy and, 158–162, 199, 252n4; political engagement and, 46, 177–183, 198–200, 217; political trust and, 158–162, 199, 252n4; race and, 46, 141–143, 151, 196, 209; religious attendance and, 46, 138, 191; skills and, 144, 146–147, 151; urban density and, 46, 196; variation across sampled countries, 131–137. *See also* demand of digital politics
online video, 2, 40, 42, 48, 69–70, 71–73; live-streaming of, 43, 78–79. *See also* Youtube
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 91, 149, 248n1, 251n3

Parti Radicale de Gauche (France), 246n1
party families: Christian-democratic and conservative, email responsiveness by, 123–124; Christian-democratic and conservative, political information among voters of, 170, 214, 216; Christian-democratic and conservative, websites of, 80, 105–108, 118–119, 127, 214, 216; classification of, 247n2; communist, 107–108, 118–119, 124; green, 107–108, 118–119, 124, 127, 167–168, 214; left-libertarian, 107–108, 124; liberal, 80, 107–108, 168; radical right, 53, 80, 107–108, 118–119, 124, 169; regionalist, 32, 80, 106–107, 118–119, 253n14; socialist and democratic, 63, 247n2; socialist and democratic, email responsiveness by, 123–124; socialist and democratic, political information among voters of, 170, 214, 216; socialist and democratic, websites of, 80, 105–108, 118–119, 123–124, 127, 214, 216. *See also* political parties
party systems, impact on election campaigns, 234n2; moderate pluralism, 32; two-party, 20, 31–32, 92, 172, 210, 253n14; variation across sampled countries, 31–32
Pasquino, Gianfranco, xiv, 6, 32, 93, 162, 182
Paul, Rand, 94
Paul, Ron, 93–94
Pearson of Rannoch, Malcolm, 84
People of Freedom Party (Italy), 38, 101–102, 105, 165–166
Perot, H. Ross, 173, 253n13
persuasion: campaign strategies and, 9, 97, 117, 212; digital media and, 60, 153, 182–183, 199; interpersonal networks and, 189, 199
Pirate Party (Germany), 18, 243n3 (chap. 2)
Plasser, Fritz, 5, 6, 7, 10, 53
political attitudes: disaffection, 20, 27, 49, 118, 162, 212; efficacy, 20, 58, 158–162, 178, 199, 212, 252n4; extremism, 163, 167, 169, 219; ideology, 19, 20, 26, 28, 46, 58, 163–175; interest, 139, 142, 147, 219, 251n1; interest, online political information and, 18, 20, 26–27, 59–60, 154–158, 178, 182–183, 198–201, 216; interest, political engagement

political attitudes: (*continued*)
and, 57–58, 132; party identification, 46, 163–175, 203–204; support, 18, 20, 26, 27, 32, 159, 198–199, 212; trust, email responsiveness and, 78, 123; trust, online political information and, 20, 46, 158–162, 198–199, 212; trust, political websites and, 112, 118, 248n2, 250n12; trust, variation across sampled countries, 250n12
political context: email responsiveness and, 121–123; online information and, 172, 192, 211–213; political websites and, 92, 113–115, 119, 125, 211–213; variation across sampled countries, ix, x, 14, 17, 33
political culture, 26, 32, 46, 51, 159, 199, 212–213; variation across sampled countries, 32–33; voter turnout and, 150
political demands: digital media as channels of, x, 20, 27, 59, 151, 199, 212–213; pluralism in, 172, 180, 203, 219; political institutions as channels of, 195, 243n1 (chap. 1)
political discussion, 20, 51; campaign communication and, 173; news media and, 182; online political information and, 46, 177–183, 189, 198–200, 201, 218–219; social media and, 182; two-step flow of communication and, 20, 182–183, 189, 198–199, 201, 218–219, 222; use of the internet and, 60, 182
political engagement: causal determinants of, 58, 153, 158; definition of, 27, 177, 220, 222–223; differences between men and women in, 139; education and, 146; impact of the internet on, 13, 15–16, 57–59, 192; as a ladder, 44, 137, 141, 176–177, 192; minorities and, 141–142; political information and (*see* political information: as political engagement); political websites and (*see* political websites: engagement and); protest, 15, 18, 160–161, 199, 212, 253n1; variation across sampled countries, 33, 63–64; youth and, 20, 59, 143–144, 146, 151, 194, 209. *See also* volunteers; voter turnout
political information: acquisition of, 131; avoidance of, 60–61, 131–132, 155; causal determinants of, 131–132, 155; circulation of, 14–15, 20, 182–183, 189, 201, 218–219, 222; exposure to, selective, 8, 222; exposure to, inadvertent, 52, 62, 146; measurement of, 44–45, 250n1; as political engagement, 44–45, 137, 141, 143, 151, 192, 245n1; "political omnivores" and, 184, 188; processing of, 131, 156, 183, 200, 219; "shortcuts" to, 131; use of mass media for (*see* news media: use for political information). *See also* online political information
political institutions: campaign communication and, 10; citizen evaluations of, 158; digital politics and, ix, 13, 28, 31–32, 51, 172, 211–213; voter turnout and, 150–151, 196, 212
political marketing, 9, 166; importation from United States, 5–6, 10; as relationship marketing, 9, 243n3 (chap. 1)
political organizations: collective action and, 15, 214, 220; digital politics and, ix, 11–12, 14–15, 213–215; email responsiveness and, 121, 123–124; hybridization of, 14, 16; incremental approach to innovation by, 49–50; need to control messages by, 15–16, 49, 75–76, 83; political websites and, 113–115, 118, 213–215; preferences of, ix, 12, 93; repertoires of, 14, 15, 43–44, 221; responses to crises of, 158–159
political participation. *See* political engagement
political parties: adoption of digital media by, 48, 76, 84–85, 115, 125, 213–214, 221; campaign communication and, 8–9; competition among, x, 16–17, 27–28, 51, 104, 118–120, 172–175; competition within, 54–56; control of government by (*see* government: parties' influence on); control of media, 188; "cyber," 15; elite preferences, 10, 53, 55–56, 61, 85, 125–127, 214–215; identification with (*see* political attitudes: party indentification); ideology, conservative, 19, 53, 111, 119, 124; ideology, email responsiveness and, 123–125; ideology, extremist, 19, 53, 107–108, 118–119, 124, 214–215, 219; ideology, progressive, 19, 53, 111, 119, 124, 127, 214–216; inclusiveness in decision making of, 19, 26–27, 55, 61, 108–110, 116–117, 125–127, 209, 214, 216,

248n3 (chap. 7); membership, 9–10, 13, 32–33, 51, 63, 108, 214; organization, 8, 15, 32–33, 53, 55, 63–64, 108, 120, 162, 217, 244n2; political engagement and, 177–183, 222; relevance of, 36, 92; trust in, 20, 46, 159–162, 199, 212, 252n5; size (major/minor), 18–21, 54, 90–95, 125–126, 167–173, 201–204, 208–210; volunteering for, and online political information, 177–183, 200; voter preferences, 9, 53, 61, 85, 125, 128, 214–215. *See also* party families
political websites: audiences of, 60; balance between information and participation in, 43, 49, 82–85, 111, 201, 208, 219; "brochureware" approach to, 71; competition and, 118–120, 127–128, 216; content analysis of, 34–40, 81–82, 227–234; delivery functions in, 19, 41–43, 70–71, 78–82, 85, 113–120; engagement and, 26, 116–118, 126–127, 216; ideology and, 26, 53, 103–108, 118–119, 127, 209, 216–217; inequalities and, 87–97, 111, 115–116, 125–126, 208, 215; information functions in, 19, 40–43, 69–73, 82–85, 113–120, 212, 214; interactivity in, 13, 48–49, 83, 255n2; methods to study, 34–44, 244n4; participation functions in, 19, 41–43, 70, 74–78, 82–85, 113–120, 214; political development and, 29; relevance of, 34–36; resources and, 19, 52, 90–95, 115–116, 125–126, 208, 246n2; standardization of, 115; variation across, 83–84, 86. *See also* supply of digital politics
Popular Party (Spain), 69–70, 102, 105, 165, 247n2
primaries: adoption by parties of, 127, 248n3; communication and, 55; France 2007 presidential, 2, 55; Italy 2005 center-left, 1–2; normalization and, 54; political websites and, 19, 109–110, 116–117; as process incentives, 214; United States, 1, 3, 37, 54, 55–56, 117, 126–127; United States 2004 presidential, 1–2, 99; United States 2008 presidential, x, 88, 93, 99, 248n4; United States 2012 presidential, 94
principal components analysis (PCA), 40, 42, 43, 227–228
Prodi, Romano, 1, 2
Radical Party (Italy), 246n1
Rajoy, Mariano, 69, 102, 105
Reform Party (United States), 172–173
reinforcement: digital media and, 27, 60–61, 153, 163, 178–183, 198–199, 218–219; election campaigns and, 8; extremism and, 53, 163, 219
representation, 64, 132, 139, 150–151, 194–197, 199, 211. *See also* political demands
Republican National Committee (United States). *See* Republican Party (United States)
Republican Party (United States), 18; online political information among voters of, 165–166, 171–173; use of the web by candidates of, 54, 77; website of, 77, 99, 102, 105–106
Resnick, David, 13, 16, 27, 52, 54, 59, 60, 125, 173
resources: allocation of, 7, 16, 32, 62; campaigns and, x, 11–12, 17; email responsiveness and, 123; mobilization of, 43; political websites and (*see* political websites: resources and); public financing of, 76, 172. *See also* fundraising
Richardson, Bill, 89
Romney, Mitt, 255n1 (chap. 14)
Rospars, Joe, 35
Ross, Josh, 220–221
Rousseff, Dilma, 3
Royal, Ségolène, 2, 102, 105
Rudd, Kevin, 3, 100, 102

Sarkozy, Nicolas, 2, 102, 105
Schneider, Steven M., 12, 33, 34, 39, 49, 54, 83, 229–234, 255n2
selectivity, viii, 217; political actors and, 51–52, 126; political engagement and, 59–61, 132, 153, 155, 183–184, 198–199. *See also* internet: affordances of
Social-Democratic Party (Germany), 32, 102, 105, 127, 165, 168, 174
Socialist Party (France), 3, 55, 75, 246n1; online membership drive by, 2; online political information among voters of, 165, 174; website of, 102, 105

Socialist Workers' Party (Spain), 37; online political information among voters of, 165, 170–171, 202; website of, 69–70, 89, 102, 105
social media, vii, x, 17; adoption by political actors of, viii, 1, 48, 50, 52, 100, 122; institutional websites and, 34–36, 41, 74; political engagement via, 15–16, 44–46, 62, 251n5; political discussion via, 182, 189, 222; political information via, 184. *See also* Facebook; MeetUp.com; Twitter; Youtube
social networking sites. *See* social media
Spain: democratic consolidation in, 160; electoral system of, 92, 253n14; electoral volatility in, 97, 164; general elections of 2004, 69; general elections of 2008, 33; general elections of 2008, online political information in, 132, 165–166, 171, 202–203, 216; general elections of 2008, political websites in, 37, 69–71, 89, 101–102, 216, 252n10
Steinmeier, Frank-Walter, 105
supply of digital politics: definition of, vii, xi, 4, 5, 33, 128; dimensions of, 81–82, 124; email responsiveness and, 121–123; relationship with demand, 43–44, 62–63, 134, 137, 169, 203–205, 215–217; research on, 14, 223. *See also* political websites

Tea Party Movement (United States), 3, 162
technological development, 26–27; email responsiveness and, 123; as incentive, 51, 213–214; measurement of, 248n1; online political information and, 134–136, 193; political websites and, 95–97, 111–112, 115–116; variation across sampled countries, 31, 250n12. *See also* digital divide; internet
television: adoption by political actors of, 49, 50, 53; campaigns and, 5, 8–9, 11, 52; for political information, 46, 155–156, 183–189, 200–201, 218; public service broadcasting, 187–188, 200–201, 213, 254n5
Thompson, Tommy, 38
Truss, Warren, 84
Twitter, 34, 41

UDF/Mouvement Démocrate (France), 168–169, 171, 210
Unione di Centro [UDC] (Italy), 170, 252n9
Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (France), 89, 101–102, 165, 105
United Australia, 84
United Kingdom: comparisons with the United States, 10, 13, 31, 149; electoral system of, 92, 172; emulation of American models, 120; general elections of 2010, 3, 31, 33; general elections of 2010, online political information in, 132, 165–166, 171, 202, 204–205, 216; general elections of 2010, political websites in, 100–101, 216, 252n11; income inequalities in, 20, 149–150, 194–195, 197, 209; media system of, 186–188; newspapers in, 186–187, 201; public service broadcaster of (*see* British Broadcasting Corporation); voter turnout in, 9, 33, 150
United States: electoral system of, 92, 172, 210; income inequalities in, 20, 149–150, 194–195, 197, 209; institutional exceptionalism of, 13, 17, 37–38, 54–56, 63–65, 103, 210; midterm elections of 2006, 2; model in theories of digital politics, vii–viii, 12–14, 17, 50, 54–56, 207–210; outlier in citizens' online information, 132–135, 140, 144–145, 149, 154, 172, 209; outlier in political websites, ix, 19, 75–76, 96, 103, 126–127, 208; pluralism in, 148; political culture in, 64, 161–162; political parties in, 9–10, 63–64; presidential elections of 1992, 173, 253n12; presidential elections of 2000, 60, 173; presidential elections of 2004, 220; presidential elections of 2008, x, 33, 37, 134, 145, 221; presidential elections of 2008, online political information in, 132, 165–166, 173, 201, 216, 219; presidential elections of 2008, political websites in, 99, 209, 216; presidential elections of 2012, x, 35, 255n1 (chap. 14); racial differences in, 64, 142; voter turnout in, 9, 117, 150, 251nn6–7, 253n1. *See also* Americanization

Vendola, Nichi, 252n10
Ventura, Jesse, 172

volunteers: campaigns and, 15, 16, 91, 96, 125, 163; coordination of, 1–3, 15–16, 35, 122; recruitment of, 15, 40, 43–44, 70, 74–75, 96, 174. *See also* field operations
voter turnout: decline in, 9; email responsiveness and, 123; income inequalities and, 150–151, 196, 212; minorities and, 142; party mobilization and, 64, 117; political interest and, 153; political websites and, 19, 51, 112, 117, 125, 212; variation across sampled countries, 33

Ward, Stephen, 13, 39, 41, 48, 49, 50, 51, 60, 79, 229, 255n2
Web 2.0. *See* social media
weblogs. *See* blogs
Western democracies: comparative research on, xi, 5, 10, 12–14, 210; comparisons with the United States, viii–ix, 12, 17, 54–56, 63–65, 210, 221; declining confidence in, 27, 159; generalizations across, x, 7, 17, 29, 135, 210; inequalities in, 195; internet in, vii, ix, 4; sampled countries as representative of, 29–33, 115; United States and, 6
Workers' Party (Brazil), 3
World Bank, 30
World Values Survey, 44, 243n2 (chap. 2), 248n2

YouTube, 2, 34, 69, 72. *See also* online video

Zapatero, José Luis Rodriguez, 37, 69, 102, 105